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THE BROTHERS QUAY

# THE 3RD ALTERNATIVE

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**The slayer is back!**

AN ANITA BLAKE, VAMPIRE HUNTER NOVEL

**LAURELL K.  
HAMILTON  
OBSIDIAN BUTTERFLY**

**And this  
time she's  
working  
for  
Death ...**





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### Six-Issue Subscriptions

UK £21 · Europe £24 or 38 euros · RoW £27 · US\$33

### Twelve-Issue Subscriptions

UK £42 · Europe £48 or 76 euros · RoW £54 · US\$66

### Single Issues

UK £4 · Europe £4.50 or 7 euros · RoW £5 · US\$7

Cheques, postal orders, dollar checks etc should be made payable to 'TTA Press' and sent to either the UK or US address. All rates include postage and packing

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## REVIEWING: NEW RULES OF ENGAGEMENT

The possibility exists, given that the prestigious post of world ruler pretend is currently occupied by that nice Mr Blair, I may be assuming the mantle of TTA reviews editor (it's not yet a done deal, but my people are talking to Andy's people). In the meantime, to entertain and demonstrate to the editor that I have the necessary quality of self-obsessed megalomania, here are some random thoughts and musings on the matter of reviewing in general:

Remember, books and magazines are a side issue. It's not about them. It's about you. Your opportunity to show the world at large just how clever and witty and insightful you are.

Believe, that to criticise is human, and that the critical faculty is what distinguishes man from all the other animals. To paraphrase one of those ancient Greek guys, the uncriticised story is not worth reading.

Let your personal philosophy be, In the beginning God created the Heavens and the Earth, and then he knocked up a couple of human beings to cast a critical eye over His work and tell Him if it was any good or not (PS: God, don't give up the day job).

Find justification for what you do in Nietzsche's dictum, 'It is not enough to have a talent my friends. One must also have your permission for it.'

Have lurid sexual fantasies about Dorothy Parker and think that the Algonquin Circle was a group of swingers.

If male and a reviewer, never pass up an opportunity to write Horror fiction off as 'misogynistic trash' or dismiss SF as 'toys for boys' nonsense. It will impress all the female readers with how touchy feely you are.

If female and a reviewer, always be prepared to have a right old whinge about all that PC crapola. The male readers will think you're one of the lads and want to take you out for a night drinking pints of Heavy and singing rugby songs. Hmm! Perhaps not!

Don't take it personally when someone calls reviewers egotistical and arrogant. They're only jealous because nobody asked them to do it.

If described as vitriolic, think that you're being complimented.

Be prepared to spend the best part of a week going through a magazine with a fine tooth comb in search of the solitary typo, and then use it as the linchpin of your review.

Take a courageous stand against publishers charging outrageous prices for so-called limited editions, until somebody offers to publish your 70pp novella 'Songs of the Stillborn' and flog it at £40 a copy, at which point realise that price is not a matter critics should concern themselves with and if people are happy to pay through the nose for these things then that's their lookout.

When submitting stories to an editor never forget to mention that you'll be reviewing the next issue of their magazine in *The Fix*. To the initiated, this is known as subtext.

If anyone has the temerity to point out that, apart from reviews, you've never actually had anything published, then sniff haughtily and inform them that your story 'Menopausal Zombie Housewife From Planet Hell' recently appeared on *Tales of the Unappetising* website and was well received by both readers; also that you've several slices of ur-fiction under consideration at *The Gourmet's Guide to Grand Guignol*.

Keep in mind that reviewers are sent loads of freebies, and also that it's a nifty way to wrack up publication credits in magazines that won't touch your stories with a bargepole (Dear Anoraks, Please don't all write in at once to point out that Peter Tennant has never had a story in TTA. I \*!#\*u\*# know!!).

Never doubt for a moment your ability to tell a million-selling author with a twenty-year track record of success where he or she is going wrong.

When you see a book that you've reviewed sitting at the top of the Bestseller Charts then feel, in some small way, you are responsible, regardless of whether the review was positive or not.

Make it your ambition in life to write something a publisher will want to use as a back cover blurb when the paperback edition comes out, so you can then tell people your work has reached an audience of millions.

Be prepared to champion the writing of some obscure and little known East European author, so that you needn't feel you're the only unrecognized genius in the world.

Remember that, according to Georges Polti, there are only 36 basic plots (a lot less according to other authorities), so the chances are if you describe something as unoriginal you're on firm ground.

Actually you should always describe a book or story as unoriginal and compare it to what's gone before as a way of impressing people with how well read you are. Slip something new past you? No way!

Bear in mind that reviewing is not covered under the Geneva Convention, so you don't need to exercise restraint. Editors might claim to welcome constructive criticism, but we all know demolition is the necessary precondition. Let your motto be, 'Light blue touchpaper and retire.'

Nonetheless take great care not to offend anyone who might, at some future date, be in a position to publish your own work, or at least have the sense to use a pseudonym if you do. Pretending to be a member of the opposite sex is always tactically sound. You can justify it as trying to see another gender's viewpoint, and if the other gender doesn't happen to like all the stories you've praised in a gushing LOC to the editor then hey, that's just the way the cookie crumbles.

Finally, don't worry about stuff like getting your facts straight and being consistent. It's not as if anyone pays the slightest bit of attention to reviews anyway.

Peter Tennant



## BOB LIBBY

## COVER

Bob has been a working artist for about twelve years. He has worked in just about every kind of medium and finally devoted himself to digital imaging a little over three years ago. He lives in Portland, Oregon, and this piece is called 'Undeniable'.

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## ROB MIDDLETON

## OPEN THE BOX

Rob does cover art, T-shirt design etc, primarily within the punk/hardcore/metal underground, and is currently working between home and the studio space he has in the Norwich Warehouse artists studios.

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## JOHN MYROSHNYCHENKO SONG FOR EDNA

John lives with his girlfriend in Waddington, near Lincoln. After studying at the North Wales School of Art in Wrexham, he now does private commissions and illustrations for magazines. John's preference is for dark, atmospheric work which he does in acrylic (such as this piece and the cover of The Fix issue 3).



## MIKE BOHATCH

## THAT JELLYFISH MAN

Mike is a professional dark-style illustrator and artist with lots of credits to his name. Residing in Colorado and educated in all mediums, his mixed media work can be found in film, music, publications, web, books and comics.

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## BRUCE RICHARDSON

## THE LIFE TO COME

Bruce recently completed an HND in graphic design and illustration at the Oxfordshire School of Art and Design. He has now started his own small studio and has illustrated a children's book as well as Mutants Are Everywhere Phase II.

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## CHRIS NURSE SOME HELP FROM STANLEY

Chris works prolifically in the field of commercial art and design, producing editorial and book cover illustrations for a variety of clients both in the UK and the USA. He also works as a graphic/web designer, and also works with film.

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## NIGEL POTTER

## THE WEIRD WAYS

Nigel spent two years Great Yarmouth College of Art & Design and finished the course feeling very disillusioned with the whole thing. He then spent ten years working in various dead-end jobs before doing a Foundation course at Norwich School of Art & Design and a BA in Graphic Design.



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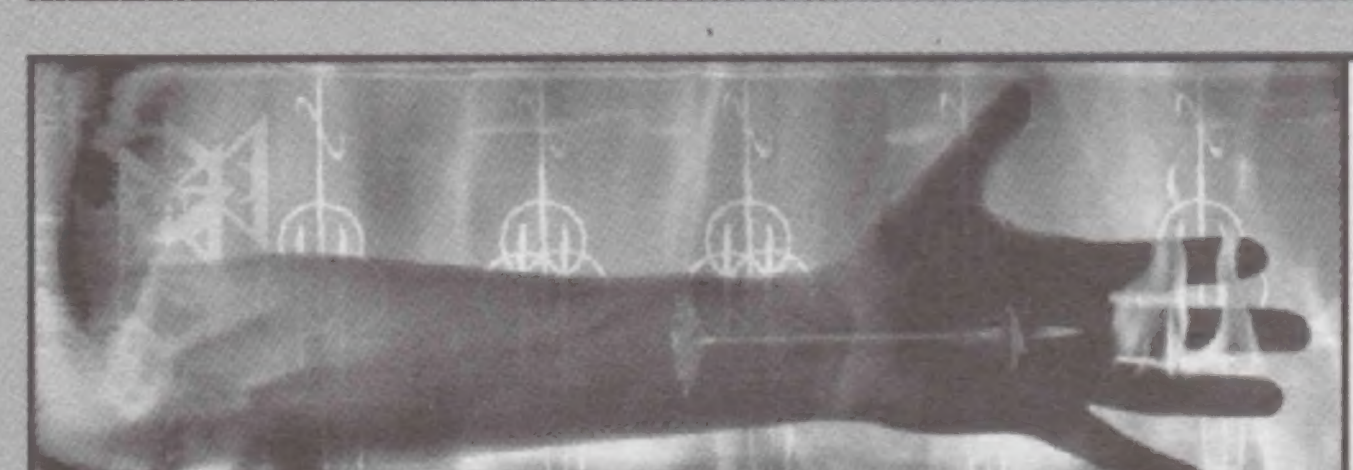
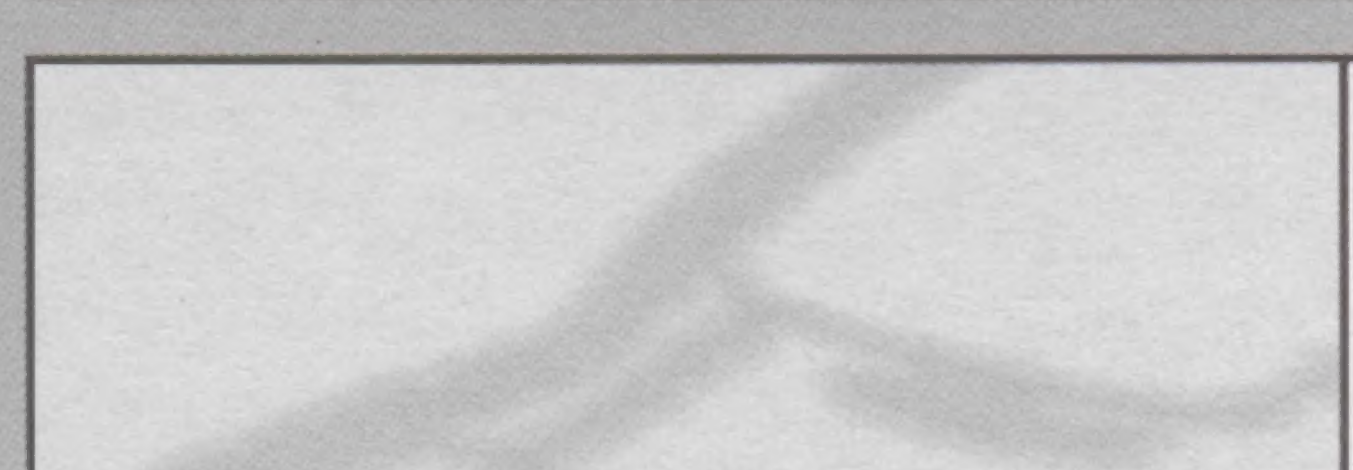
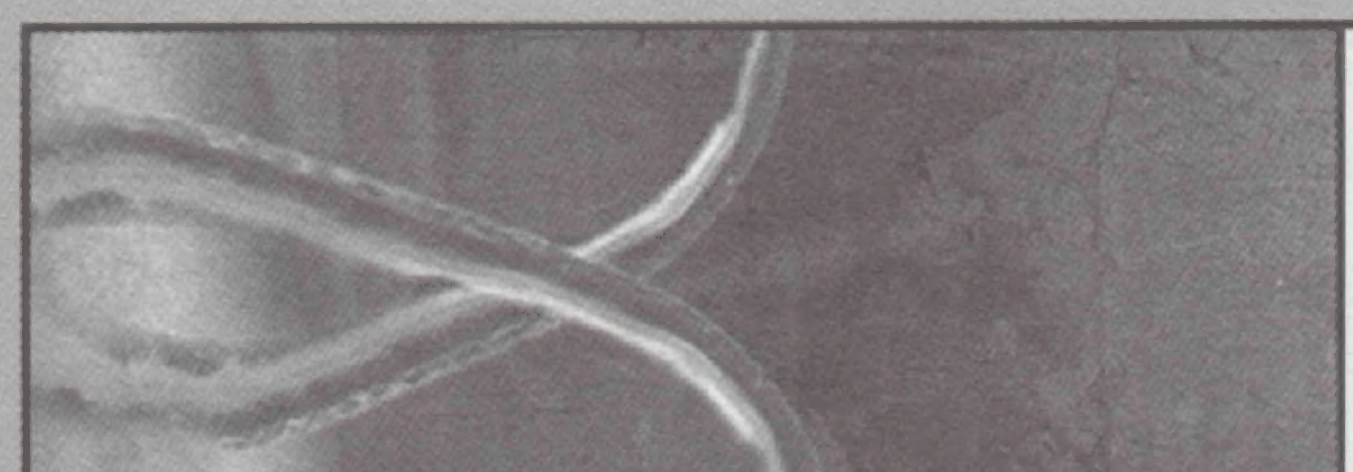
27

Allen Ashley on fiction's image problem

### THE REVIEW

61

Books reviewed by Peter Tennant and the team





**OPEN THE BOX**

STORY by ANDREW HUMPHREY

6

**SONG FOR EDNA**

STORY by BARRY FISHLER

14

**STEVE AYLETT** INTERVIEW by IAIN EMSLEY**JEFF LINT** PROFILE by STEVE AYLETT

18

**THAT JELLYFISH MAN KEEPS A-ROLLIN**

STORY by LESLIE WHAT

22

**VITAL SIGNS**

M JOHN HARRISON INTERVIEWED by DAVID MATHEW

28

**THE LIFE TO COME**

STORY by TIM LEES

32

**GOING BACK**

STORY by TONY RICHARDS

38

**ELECTRIC DARKNESS**

THE CINEMATIC EXPERIENCE by CHRISTOPHER FOWLER

40

**THE CABINET OF DREAMS**

THE FILMS OF THE BROTHERS QUAY by MARK BEECH

42

**SOME HELP FROM STANLEY**

STORY by CHARLIE WILLIAMS

48

**WATCH THE PRETTY GIRLS, KID**

STORY by JAY LAKE

54

**THE WEIRD WAYS**

STORY by SD TULLIS

56





## OPEN THE BOX

**She barely registered when I first saw her. I turned the corner from the stairway onto the top floor of St Stephen's multistorey and there she was; standing with her back to me, leaning against the safety rail, bare hands on the cold metal. She wore a black woollen overcoat that was too big for her and scuffed Doc Martens. The wind caught her hair, which was wild anyway and so dark I thought it must be dyed. She blew smoke from a roll-up into the January air. I followed her gaze. It was hard to tell where the cold concrete and steel of the car park ended and the sky began.**

I found my burgundy Mondeo and dumped my shopping in the boot, then hesitated by the driver's door. The girl and I were alone and there was something odd in the way she stood and stared at nothing but the grey middle distance. I

thought I should say something; but I was cold, I had a sore throat. I wanted to lock myself in the car, turn up the heating and listen to Coldplay on the stereo as I drove home.

As I opened the door the girl stepped onto the parapet, straddling the safety rail. She steadied herself then lifted her other leg over the rail and leant back against it, balancing awkwardly on less than a foot of concrete.

Her head tilted upwards and her eyes were closed. She wasn't pretty. I frowned and wondered if that mattered and found I wasn't sure. Her face was white, her lips thin. Her features sharp and angular.

I walked towards her. The smell of urine drifted across from the toilet by the lift. "What are you doing?" I said. Hardly original I know, but by now I felt as though I was on auto-





## ANDREW HUMPHREY

pilot; as though I was still standing by my car, leaning back against it, arms folded, bored, watching it all unfold.

"Hazard a guess," she said. Her voice was light, indifferent. She didn't turn her head. "Don't come too close. I'm going to jump anyway, but I don't think you want a front row seat. Know what I mean?"

I'd already stopped. I looked around, listening for footsteps on the stairs. I wanted this to be someone else's responsibility. Five minutes earlier, five minutes later and it would have been.

"Aren't you supposed to try and talk me down?" She sounded almost amused.

The wind that scurried amongst the concrete and steel was cold and I thrust my hands deep into my pockets. Her back was to me and I knew it was futile but I shrugged anyway.

"Well, I'd rather you didn't, but . . ." My voice tailed off. I found myself thinking about the shopping in my car, wondering how long it would take for the frozen food to defrost.

She turned at my silence. Her eyes were green and they shone with a curious light. "Hey, I'm sorry if I'm boring you."

I snapped back into focus. "God, no. Look, I'm sorry . . ."

"Forget it." She closed her eyes, exhaled slowly then turned back to face the drop. "It doesn't matter. It's all bollocks anyway. Sorry I've fucked up your day. Do me a favour? Tell my mum she's a bitch and I hate her guts."

She stepped forward and dropped out of sight. I heard nothing except the wind and the muted growl of the traffic below. I didn't rush to the rail and look down. Eventually I fumbled the phone from my coat pocket and dialled 999.



"It was her choice," Jenny said, handing me a mug of coffee and sitting in the armchair opposite. She sat with her feet splayed and her knees touching. She leant forward and looked into my face. "I suppose it was her right, actually. Don't you think?"

I sipped my coffee and said nothing. I've found with Jenny that's often the best way. This week her hair was dyed dark red and parted in the middle. She kept tucking one side behind an ear; the other hung across her left cheek, casting it in shadow. She wore a biscuit-coloured roll-neck sweater with a fawn skirt and dark brown woollen tights. Autumn personified.

She leant across, put a hand in my hair, tugged at it gently. "Answer me."

"I choose not to." I looked into her soft brown eyes and she smiled.

"You're learning, Steve. You've changed a lot."

"For the better?"

"Of course. If today had happened a year ago imagine the state you'd be in. You'd have dissolved. You'd have probably followed her down."

"Instead I was just bored. Annoyed. Worried about the state of my shopping. The poor cow even apologised for fucking up my day. That's progress, I suppose."

I felt her eyes on my face but I wouldn't meet them. I put my mug on the coffee table. We were in Jenny's flat near the city centre. It was early evening and dark outside. We were snug in the lamplight with the curtains drawn.

I sat back and let my breath out slowly. The sofa was old and lumpy; mustard Dralon covered with a patterned throw that smelled of pot. "According to the police her name was Julie. Julie Patterson."

"Does that matter?"

"I expect it matters to her mother."

"And do you know her mother?"

"You know I don't."

"So why does it matter to you?"

"Not tonight, Jenny. For Christ's sake."

She smiled and ran her fingers through her hair, pulling it back, away from her face. Her features changed as they emerged from shadow.

"I'll be off," I said. "It's been quite a day."

"I thought you'd stay."

"Not tonight."

She stood, folding her arms. She was a little shorter than me. Twenty-three years old. Pretty, most of the time. "We haven't slept together for over a week."

"Jenny, three hours ago I watched a girl commit suicide. I'm really not up for a shag."

She shrugged. "Sex and death. I thought it might get you going."

I put on my coat. "Goodnight, Jenny," I said.

"Oh, God. Rejection. How will I cope?" She smiled as she spoke, even laughed a little. But her eyes wavered on my face.

We'd met four years earlier when Jenny had temped at the insurance company where I work. One of the underwriters had left unexpectedly and his supervisor discovered a pile of unprocessed proposal forms in his desk drawer. Jenny and I spent a week clearing the backlog. Her hair was blonde then, tied back in pigtails. She wore short skirts and bright make-up and too much perfume. She made me coffee and bought me King Size Mars Bars. She looked me in the eye when I spoke and listened to every word. I wasn't used to that.

I was twenty-four and recovering from a broken engagement. Jenny got the whole story. She made the right noises

at the right times and said that Karen was a fool to let me go. I suppose I lapped it up. She left on the Friday and we agreed to go for a drink over the weekend.

When Jenny opened the door to me on the Saturday evening I thought I'd got the wrong flat. Her hair was jet-black, cut very short. She wore a baggy purple sweater with a pleated skirt, black leggings and trainers.

"Oh," I said.

"What?"

"Nothing. You look different."

"And?"

"It's a bit of a surprise."

"Good. Surprises are good. Don't you think?"

"Sure."

"Right." She looked suddenly serious and glanced at her watch. "Decision time."

"What?"

"We can go to bed or nip around the corner for a pizza. Your choice. You've got five seconds. Go."

I stared at her open mouthed as she counted the seconds down.

"Time's up," she said. "Call me tomorrow." She shut the door in my face. I stood there for ten minutes, knocking occasionally, then gave up and went home.

I phoned the next day and got no reply. I was determined not to call on the Monday but by 10:30 in the morning I had. I went to her flat at lunchtime, not knowing what to expect. We drank coffee and talked for hours. At least Jenny talked for hours. It was like a dam bursting. An erratic dam at that, as she flitted from subject to subject without warning. I was bewildered, but intoxicated. Occasionally she'd lean across and slip her tongue into my mouth and kiss me slowly and deeply for perhaps five minutes before withdrawing and talking again as though nothing had happened.

We went to bed, eventually. I was dazed and lost and Jenny took the lead. The bedroom was damp, the sheets clammy. Jenny guided me and teased me and came at me from all angles and it was more like a battle than making love. She was on top when I finally came. She leant over me, ran her fingers through the sweat on my chest. I felt as though I'd been drugged and beaten.

It was Saturday lunchtime when I met Carol Patterson, four days after her daughter's death. We sat in the corner of the Horse and Dray on Ber Street; near a fruit machine and an open fire, opposite the French windows that led to the walled off area that was popular in the summer. She'd telephoned me the previous evening. The call had surprised me and I agreed to meet her without asking why or thinking it through.

She was a short woman, about fifty, slim, with a thin face, hollow cheeks and startled blue eyes. Her hair was her best feature; it fell in chestnut curls to her shoulders, softening the sharpness of her face.

She thanked me for seeing her and we made some stilted small talk. She took a deep swallow of her gin and tonic. She put the glass precisely on the beer mat and ran a finger through the beads of condensation. Her hands showed her age the most; veins blue and prominent through the thin skin. Her nails were immaculate though; carefully shaped and painted.

Finally she got to it. "I spoke to the police about Julie's final moments. They told me about you, obviously." She looked at her glass as she spoke, tilting it so that the ice cubes clinked together. "Apparently Julie said nothing before she jumped. You walked towards her and before either of you could say anything she went over the edge."



"That's right," I said. I felt my cheeks colour slightly. I drank some lager.

"I don't believe you."

I looked up in surprise. She'd seemed timid, incapable of confrontation. "Why should I lie?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. Don't care. I'm not trying to trick you or accuse you of anything. You're my last link with Julie, Mr Rose." She paused, glanced up at me again. "Steve. My last link. She didn't even leave a note. She must have said something. Perhaps it didn't seem important at the time. It must have been difficult for you. You were in shock, I expect."

Her voice had an edge to it. A whine. The need came off her in thick waves.

I looked into my drink. "She said she loved you."

"What?"

"Look, I'm sorry. You're right. I was in shock. She said, tell mum I love her and that I'm sorry."

"No she didn't."

I kept looking down and said nothing. A chocolate Labrador gazed balefully at us from beyond the French window, its expression almost comically sad.

"Julie was a drug addict. Heroin mostly. In and out of rehab since she was fifteen. Her dad left us a couple of years earlier. I blame him. Easier than blaming myself, isn't it? The last time she told me she loved me she was twelve years old. God knows I've tried to help her. But last week I simply couldn't take anymore. I found out she'd been stealing from me. It wasn't the first time, but this was so cold, so systematic. And she was back on heroin, of course. She swore she was clean, but it was just another lie. So I kicked her out. Tough love I think they call it." She was quiet for a moment, her thoughts wandering. Then she composed herself and looked into my face. "So, tell me what she said. Please."

I told her. She nodded.

"Thanks for getting there. In the end."

She talked some more about Julie and I nodded occasionally, not really listening. We finished our drinks. She asked me if I'd like another and I said no. Then she surprised me. "Can I see you again?" she said.

"What?"

"I'd like to meet you again. To talk."

"Why?"

"I said before. You're my last link with Julie. I can't just let that go." Her eyes were wide, her voice uncertain.

"I don't think so."

"Please." Her need was almost tangible and it revolted me.

"No. It's not going to happen. It wouldn't help either of us." I spoke more sharply than I intended. I thought of Jenny, of how she would approve.

Carol's face trembled. She stood and swept past me without speaking. I didn't look back and moments later I heard the door open then close. She left only the heavy scent of her perfume and an empty glass with lipstick prints on the rim.

It was a weekday, the first February after we met and Jenny and I drove to Cromer in my new Mondeo.

"Am I supposed to be impressed by this?" she said.

"What?"

"The new car. The penis substitute. Do you think it'll make me wet?"

"It's just a car," I said mildly. "You're generalising again."

"Don't patronise me." She turned her head away, her face set in a determined pout. But she looked beautiful that day. She'd let her hair grow out into its natural colour, a sort of dirty blonde. She fixed it in a ponytail with a crimson scrun-

chy. Beneath her dark coat she wore a simple black woollen dress with black stockings and high-heeled shoes. When I picked her up that morning I said she looked edible and she told me to grow up.

"You're nineteen, for Christ's sake. You can't tell me to grow up," I said, offended.

She looked up at me for a long moment then and I thought she was going to hit me, or cry, or both.

In the end she said quietly, "You can be an arsehole sometimes, Steve," and walked out to the car.

It was cold and clear inland but when we hit Cromer the front and the beach were coated with a thick, freezing fog.

Jenny brightened immediately. "I love it. The way it distorts everything. Sound. Distances." We paused at the bottom of the concrete ramp that led to the beach and Jenny slipped off her shoes and handed them to me.

"You'll freeze," I said.

"Well, you'll just have to warm me up then, won't you?" she said, slipping an arm in mine and leaning against my shoulder.

I pulled her closer. I felt a knot in my stomach loosen.

We ate fish and chips at the Cromer Grill and on a normal day we could have seen the sea from our table. But today fog pressed up against the window and tendrils of it eased into the restaurant's warmth whenever the door was opened. The fog smelled of vinegar and crabs and cold salt.

Later, we found a second-hand shop a couple of streets away. Jenny headed straight for the books. They occupied one corner; a mix of hardbacks and paperbacks sprawled in random piles.

"They're only 50p each," Jenny said, kneeling among them. "Look. James Lovegrove. Nicholas Royle. Excellent."

I smiled. I was about to join her when I saw the pile of shoes that filled the opposite corner. According to a handwritten sign they were a pound a pair. Not that they were sorted into pairs. They were in a single heap, as random as the books. Odd children's shoes emerged; pink, yellow, bright blue. I squinted at them, squeezing the colour out, seeing them in black and white.

I closed my eyes and turned away. The elderly lady behind the cash register was regarding me curiously. She was smoking a cigarette that looked and smelled French and knitting something long and pink.

Belatedly I realised that Jenny was calling me. She was holding some books up for my inspection and grinning.

"Yeah, great," I said. "You take your time. I'll wait for you outside."

She followed me through the door. "What?" she said.

"Nothing," I said. "What happened to your books?"

"Fuck the books. What's the matter?" She linked her arm in mine and we walked slowly.

"It was those shoes," I said. "It probably sounds stupid. I visited the Auschwitz museum a couple of years ago. There was a glass case full of shoes. Twenty-five thousand pairs. That was one day's worth, Jenny. One day. Can you imagine that?" I could. Indeed had, often. "It reminded me of that. It's something I often think about. Dream about, even. It upset me a bit, that's all."

We walked for a while in silence then Jenny slowly pulled her arm from mine. "Are you a Jew, Steve?" she said quietly.

"No." I glanced at her uneasily.

"Any Jewish friends? Anyone you know whose relatives were caught up in the Holocaust?"

"No. Why?"



"Then what the fuck were you doing visiting Auschwitz? It's none of your business." She stopped and turned towards me. The fog had lifted a little and the fury was clear on her face. "Those shoes upset you, did they? It's something you think about, is it? Well that's big of you, Steve. Those kids have been dead over fifty years. All your thoughts, all your upset, what iota of good have they done?"

"Fucking hell, Jenny . . ."

"Shut up. You're a self-indulgent wanker, Steve. I'm catching the train home. I wash my hands of you."

She turned on her heels and walked into the fog. It was three months before I saw her again.

A week after Carol Patterson walked out on me in the pub Jenny and I sat on a bench next to Pull's Ferry and fed stale bread to the ducks and geese and watched the Yare's green water ebb against the bank. The day was clear and cold and thin sunlight sparkled off the river and Jenny's eyes shone with dark refracted light. As so often happens on still days in Norwich the stink of chemical shit drifted across the city from the sewerage works at Whittlingham.

"Is she still ringing you, then?" Jenny said, tossing the last of the breadcrumbs onto the river's edge then clapping her gloved hands together to clear the debris.

"Every night," I said, "and at work. I've tried to be reasonable but I ended up putting the phone down on her yesterday."

"Poor cow's probably after your body. You should give her a break."

I looked across at her. She stared straight ahead and her face was empty. Occasionally we heard the roar of the crowd from the football match at Carrow Road.

"Look, I feel sorry for her, but frankly it's not my problem. I thought you'd approve. You taught me all I know, after all."

She put her hands to her mouth in mock-horror and for the first time that day there was a trace of animation in her voice. "Oh my God. I've created a monster."

On the far side of the bank, to our left, a line of three anglers sat motionless, hunched forward, breath turning to smoke in the cold air. Raucous ducks surrounded our feet and a pair of blue tits hovered at their periphery.

Jenny and I had met only twice in the last ten days and kissed just once, at her instigation. Even then she'd withdrawn quickly, sensing my hesitation. I hadn't missed her. As I sat next to her on the cold bench, with her cute in her beige bobble hat and sleek brown coat with matching boots, I realised that a large part of me would rather have been at the football match half a mile away.

I thought for a moment then looked across at her. "Jenny, I think we should stop seeing each other."

She paused, not looking at me. "I can't hear you," she said. "It doesn't count if I can't hear you, does it? That's what we used to say at school." She shot me a crooked smile, one I didn't think I'd seen before.

"We've not been close recently, have we?"

"Whose fault is that?"

"I don't think blame is helpful," I said, following the conventions doggedly, eyes cast down, not even particularly interested anymore.

"Don't look so worried, Steve. I'll live. I don't even mind that much. I miss the old Steve."

That got my attention, as I suppose she knew it would. "That's a bit rich, isn't it? Considering the old Steve is in there," I said, pointing at her stomach. "You swallowed him whole."

"You took me so seriously. I was only nineteen, what the hell did I know? I was just fucking with your head. But you took it all, didn't you? Jumped through hoops. Changed your-

self because I said so. It was a bit of a rush, actually. At first."

She gave me that crooked grin again. There were spots of colour high on her cheeks and her eyes were bright. I looked away from her and said nothing.

"Don't worry," she said, "I'll never darken your doorstep again."

"Jenny."

"Good old Steve. Still can't take a joke. Actually I've got a chance of a job away. In Manchester."

"Christ. You'll need your passport. What is it? Still with the BBC?"

She nodded. "I suppose I might as well take it."

"It sounds good."

"You don't have to look so relieved."

"I'm not," I said quickly.

She laughed. "It doesn't matter. It's all bollocks anyway."

I looked at her sharply then but her expression was blank. I started to say something but she stopped me. "Please spare me that crap about still being friends."

"Right," I said. "But there's no one else, you know. If that matters."

"Don't flatter yourself, Steve. I don't care. You are now, officially, in the past."

She stood and kissed me primly on the forehead. Her lips were cold. She walked off in the direction of Riverside. I watched her briefly then looked away. A pair of geese squabbled noisily on the far side of the river.

After Jenny abandoned me in the Cromer fog we spoke on the telephone a handful of times; drab conversations, Jenny speaking in a bored monotone while I fought to keep the desperation out of my voice. It was May before we met. It had rained heavily the day before but the Saturday I walked to her flat it was warm and bright and the air fizzed with the scent of fruit and new leaves gathering on wet trees.

She didn't look surprised to see me. She ushered me in without speaking.

"My turn to surprise you," I said.

"It's only taken you three months."

"But you told me to keep away."

"So I did," she said. She seemed bored and she wouldn't look at me. "And as usual, you believed me."

Her hair was short again and vaguely pink. She wore a yellow cotton dress and white sandals. I could see the outline of her knickers through the dress and she wasn't wearing a bra.

"Have a good look, why don't you," she said and I turned my head away, blushing.

"How about if I had a man here?"

"What?"

"You heard me."

"Have you been seeing other people?"

"That's my business. And it's not the point."

I stood with my face burning, wondering what the hell I was doing there.

"What's that? A present?" she said.

I was carrying a shoe box and she was looking at it.

"No. Not a present. More like a confession."

I put the box on the coffee table and removed the lid. Jenny sat in the chair next to it and peered inside.

"Newspaper cuttings," she said, pulling a handful of papers out of the box and leafing through them.

"Mostly from The Guardian and Observer. Stuff off the Internet as well. I expect you think it's sick."

She looked slowly through the cuttings and said nothing. They were mostly articles and photographs relating to the Holocaust, but some concentrated on executions of Partisans







in Poland and Czechoslovakia in the early years of the war. The photographs were stark and graphic.

"I thought about what you said in Cromer. About Auschwitz. You were right. It's misplaced pity. Something to hide behind. An excuse to feel sorry for myself." I pointed at the box. "I've been collecting this stuff for about five years. I look through them every month or so." Suddenly, stupidly, I felt close to tears. "I don't know why."

"Why give them to me?"

"I mean I don't get off on this stuff or anything. I empathise with the victims. I'm not some Hitler groupie." I put my hands to my face and rubbed my eyes hard.

"Why give them to me, Steve?"

"I want you to burn them. I want you to help me put this behind me. I want you to help me change, Jenny." My eyes were hot. I knuckled them again.

"I can't give you absolution, Steve," she said, then shrugged. "Just lighten up. Don't take yourself so seriously. Don't take me so seriously. Stick the box in the bin."

"No. You take them, Jenny. It's important."

She gave me an odd smile, her head tilted to one side. She stood and picked up the box. "Come with me."

I followed her into the bedroom. She opened the wardrobe and put the box in the corner, on the floor and covered it with an old sweater. "There," she said, "out of harms way."

"Thank you."

She smiled at me again. This time there was a hint of warmth and I felt my pulse quicken. "You're a strange one," she said. "What am I going to do with you?"

I said nothing. I could hear my heart thump in my chest.

She pulled the straps of her dress away from her shoulders and let it drop to the floor. Her nipples looked dark and hard and I remembered how they felt in my mouth.

She stepped out of her knickers. "We've got some catching up to do," she said. She smiled her odd smile and held her arms out towards me.

Jenny and I met just once more before she moved to Manchester; at her flat on a damp cold Sunday morning. We handed back books and CDs that we'd lent each other. She had more of mine than I had of hers and I told her not to worry about it, but she insisted. There was something ritualistic about it, I suppose. And an air of finality.

We spoke little and when we did we were unnaturally polite. She said she'd met someone called Guy and he was cute and there was talk of him joining her in Manchester at some point. I said I was pleased and found that I meant it.

I was glad to leave. Jenny seemed smaller somehow, more rooted in the usual dimensions. I walked home through streets that were drab and grey, but I caught myself whistling and smiling at people that I didn't know.

The next weekend I watched Norwich City draw nil-nil with Barnsley at Carrow Road. I was numb with cold long before the end. It was a poor match. Barnsley were muscular, Norwich gormless. I thought of Jenny sometimes, but not that often.

The Friday after I tried one of the plethora of clubs that had sprung up on the Riverside development. I spent the evening and the early hours of the next morning drinking vodka and Red Bull and attempting to hold shouted conversations with people I'd never met before and didn't particularly want to meet again. I ended up pissed and wired. The next two days passed in a grainy, monochrome haze.

Some time in early spring when all was calm and smooth and my life seemed to belong to me and to nobody else I found

myself in front of Carol's house on Bluebell Road. It was a redbrick semi-detached with a glass porch. Winter jasmine laced the trelliswork on top of the fence. I knocked without thinking and when she answered I didn't know what to say. Neither did she and for several interminable moments we gazed awkwardly past each other's shoulders until she ushered me inside.

"This is a surprise," she said. Her eyes were the startling blue I remembered but dark flecks seemed to swim in them now. She didn't smile.

"I wondered how you were," I said, attempting a grin that was meant to be disarming, but probably fell a long way short. "I'm sorry about . . . before. I feel bad about it."

"Do you?" she said. Her hair was straighter and shorter. She wore a navy sweatshirt and a knee-length skirt. Her shoulders slumped and her features relaxed. She pushed the living room door open. "Come on through. I'll make some tea." She smiled. "It's good to see you, actually. Despite everything."

We ended up drinking tea in the kitchen, sitting opposite each other at the chunky pine table. "It's me who should be apologising," she said. "I lost it badly. I had no right to pester you like that."

I mumbled something and drank some tea. Carol talked about Julie for a while; how she'd coped since the funeral. I pretended to listen and nodded occasionally. "And I'm seeing someone. I've known him for years. It's not serious and it's not exclusive." She looked at me as she spoke. "And how are you?"

I shrugged. "Oh, fine. Great, really."

She kept looking at me. "How's Jenny?"

I paused. I couldn't remember telling her about Jenny. I could have asked her about that, or told her to mind her own business. I could have smiled and ignored the question. I think that's what I meant to do. Instead I looked up at her and spoke for perhaps fifteen minutes, barely pausing to draw breath, about Jenny and I. How we met and how we'd ended. How it was Jenny's fault that I'd treated Carol so thoughtlessly. It just gushed out. Like bile. I glanced up at Carol occasionally but she kept her expression blank. When I finished she said, "And you miss her?"

I laughed. "Christ, no. Too much like hard work. I'm much happier now."

She nodded slowly. I stood and she put a hand on my arm. "Can I show you something before you go?"

I nodded.

I followed her upstairs. On the small landing she paused outside a white panel door. "This is Julie's room," she said, almost reverently. "I've kept it just how it was."

How original, I thought. She pushed the door open. It was my turn to keep my expression blank. It wasn't much of a shrine. A single bed covered with a beige patterned blanket. Pale emulsioned walls dotted with sporadic posters of Placebo and Mansun. Generic bedroom furniture. A few cuddly toys. A radio. The scent of old pot.

Carol sat on the bed with her back to me, her hands smoothing the blanket on either side of her. I thumbed through some paperbacks in a dark wood bookcase. There were several Terry Pratchett's and I looked up to ask her something and I saw that her shoulders were shaking.

I moved towards her, extending a hand. I said her name. She let out a braying sob, turned slightly, took my hand and pushed it against her hair. "Come on," I said, moving closer. She pressed her face against my stomach. I could feel her heat through my cotton shirt. Her face was level with the waistband of my jeans. Her sobbing subsided. "I'm sorry, Steve," she said.



I stroked her head and said nothing.

"Don't go yet," she said. Her voice was thick, clotted.

"Carol," I said.

I felt her undo the lower buttons on my shirt and pull it open. I closed my eyes as she nuzzled the soft flesh around my navel. "Oh, shit," I said.

I took her from behind on her daughter's bed. She was on all fours, skirt hitched up, tights and knickers yanked down, bunched above her knees. She howled when she came and I wondered if I was killing her. I'm not sure what noise I made but the intensity of my orgasm astonished me. My knees buckled and I fell against her. I thought I could smell her sweat and her need but it might well have been my own.

After we'd cleaned up we could barely look at each other. We made it downstairs somehow and when I stepped out into the brightness of the day the air felt cool on my burning cheeks.

I was on her doorstep again the next evening, just before dusk. Carol looked tired when she opened the door and she shook her head.

"Fine," I said, with my head down. But I didn't move.

"Oh, shit," she said, and reached for me.

We went to Julie's room again. Same bed, same position. Same tights and knickers for all I know. Same orgasm.

She didn't answer the door the next time I called, a couple of days later, although I was sure she was in. The same thing happened the next day and the day after. Her telephone was permanently engaged.

On Saturday I answered my door to a bearded, middle-aged man who said his name was Dave and he was a friend of Carol's. I didn't invite him in. He looked wretched and couldn't meet my eyes and mumbled so badly that I had to ask him to repeat himself. "You've got to keep away from Carol, man."

"My name's Steve."

"Whatever. Don't call. Don't visit. She'll call the police if you do. I don't know what happened between you two; don't want to know. But she's really fucked up. You've got to give her a break." He spoke quickly, through gritted teeth, trying to get it over with.

"No problem."

He glanced up at me. "You're cool with that?"

"Yeah. I'm cool. Man. What? Do I look desperate?"

I thought I saw a flash of anger then, but it didn't last long. He looked down again, shook his head, walked away from me.

I closed the door and went into the kitchen. I smashed all my drinking glasses, one after the other, against the tiles above the sink.

I phoned in sick on Monday. Said I was running a temperature. By Wednesday I was and I lay on the sofa, wrapped in my quilt, watching daytime television. It was the end of that week that Jenny sent the shoebox back; wrapped in brown paper with a Manchester postmark. There was a note attached. She couldn't bring herself to burn it, she said. But she couldn't keep it. She often found herself looking through the contents and thinking of me. I wasn't sure what to make of that.

But I spent an hour browsing through the cuttings. They felt like old friends.

Saturday evening I sit at my kitchen table with that day's

Guardian spread in front of me. The shoebox is open on a chair by my side. I settle on an article that caught my eye earlier. The headline reads WHAT DADDY DID IN THE WAR. It deals with the enthusiastic complicity of ordinary Germans involved in atrocities throughout Europe during World War II. Two photographs sit in the middle of the text. The first shows a greatcoat clad Nazi officer placing a noose around the neck of a young woman. The officer is clean-shaven and smiling. The woman is probably little more than a girl. She is pretty, with blonde curly hair, wearing a blouse and a cardigan and a skirt. Her hands are tied behind her back. She gazes with no expression at a point somewhere beyond the camera. Just to the side of her, noose already in place, is a strikingly handsome boy with thick dark hair. He smiles straight at the camera.

The next picture, presumably taken minutes later, shows the aftermath. The officer is out of shot. The girl and the boy hang, their heads angled towards one another. According to the caption this is the execution, by the Gestapo, of members of the Resistance in France in 1941.

I stare at the photographs for a long time. I touch them, run my fingers across their surface. I wonder what their names were — the boy, the girl, the officer, whoever stood behind the camera. I wonder what they thought and felt in those last moments. Perhaps if I stare hard enough I can pull myself back to that French dawn. It will be as grey and cold as steel. I wonder on which side of the camera I'd be.

At last I sit up, rub my eyes. I cut the pictures out and put them in the box.

Andrew Humphrey has recently started to publish stories in various magazines, including the very well received 'Family Game' in *Crimewave* 5. This is his first story for TTA, and he has recently completed his first novel, *Alison*, which we'll be publishing this summer.

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SONG FOR



**He was a dark shape wrapped in shadows, and he played** with just the softest of tiny spotlights laid across his horn. Few in the house, even most of the wistful-eyed women and chastened-looking men who had listened to him blow his tenor for more than forty years, had nearly as good a view of him as he did of them, and the rest were probably not even certain of exactly what he looked like. He couldn't really say whether that displeased him or not.

His name was Jasmine Jones — a fat black man with a funny name that had been Jasmine for as long as anybody could recall. He guessed it had started out as Jazzman, but who could remember that far? It was hard enough to still touch on his real name — though it might be Jeremiah — and he had grown into a familiar kind of comfort with Jasmine, which was much more like his music than he thought Jeremiah ever might have been.

The music was ballads. Ballads and that was all, even though most players couldn't carry that kind of set and wouldn't even try. It was just too risky. By the third or fourth number the house would be getting itchy, wanting the hard bop that had already started to take over when he was just a child, and they'd pick up on it if they were any kind of player at all and start to turn things up, 'cause no jazzman worth a shit ever wanted to leave his house in a different place. They *had* to; not a one of them had ever known the way to that strange, misty place where Jasmine found his music.

It was *special* music, God's gift, and he had known it always and stubbornly, so that it had taken him a shitass long time to put his combo together, to get his rep and his crowd. But it was also why he knew they were his forever. They knew what they were getting when they came to listen, and if they didn't want to listen, they just didn't come, 'cause nobody yet had ever paid their good money to hear Jasmine Jones flat run his mouth on his horn, doing pretty bop runs that belonged to somebody else's soul. He didn't know any more than that and didn't want to. Guys who played for a crowd that wasn't really theirs because they couldn't *make* it theirs didn't have shit that was new to say, anyway. All they'd be doing is putting out what other folks already knew. And there were books for that.

Oh, he was special, alright. He could turn a solo that was like a candle that never burned completely down and keep it there all night, so that his crowd was all on fire inside and paralyzed through and through, giving up their memories to stoke the furnace in his horn so he could feed it back to them in the candle's flame.

Could anybody *else* do that? Why, he could take all the pain a body had ever known in a lifetime and shape it into sounds so perfect a person might be ready to die, except that would mean leaving that goddamn miracle of a horn behind, which was maybe the true meaning of death, after all.

He opened his eyes and watched soft loops of smoke rise into the beam of the tiny spot, wrapping around the light and grasping for one hungry moment before vanishing into the blackness. The briefest of smiles crossed his lips, even

as he played, because he knew he could do that very thing with his music, send a single, bittersweet note into the darkness to touch the light and dance away into silence. If he was in the mood, he might even drape a few bars at a woman's feet, watching each note of the run swell up from the floor and then sit back down, waiting for one lovely tone he could let slide up the shimmering nylon of her leg to nestle in the softness between her thighs, letting her feel just enough warmth to know the depth of his love and the sad longing of his heart.

Did the critics who had tried to describe his sound know he could do *that*? He didn't think so. They had been so far from his soul when they talked about his music that he knew they weren't his, not even the ones who liked him, remembering his early sound and marveling at what had come later — after — but still missing everything.

The closest any of them had ever come was a review in Downbeat that had talked about his new sound being open and breathy, kind of like Ben Webster's. A nice thing to say, he had thought at the time — Ben had been great, bless his soul — but it was nothing like *him*, nothing at all. Didn't they ever close their eyes and *listen*? It was the closest of all, and it was still a million miles off from the places he'd been and the lessons he had to teach them. Talking about the way Jasmine Jones had come to *sound* wasn't ever going to nail down what he was *about*, and trying had made a lot of jazz critics sound like jackasses. Maybe after tonight they'd be smarter. There was always that chance.

Open and breathy was true enough, he thought, but it still didn't really say shit. It didn't say about the *power*, at all, and certainly not about the *why* of it.

Why, indeed? In the beginning, he had thought it was to help him find answers, to go *inside*. But that was back in the days when he was arrogant enough to think he knew any questions. Before Edna. Before Route 50.

He knew better now. So that if he hadn't found any answers, he at least had found questions to play his next song on, and the one after that, and all the rest that would keep him going until sunrise, wondering if maybe it was good that some things stayed inside, and that maybe that was what God had given us insides for in the first place.

Eyes closed, he felt his horn sigh, his body swaying in the soft glow of a hundred cigarettes. It was getting smokier now, and he thought it might be getting on to midnight. It had been a long time since he'd needed a watch. You had the smoke to go by, only wispy at the beginning when the ashtrays were still clean, but then gathering up around the rafters like a great storm cloud getting ready to blow. Or there was the feel of your big body as the stains slowly worked their way around to press their cold dampness against your heart. And always you had the very *sense* of things, the silence around your music intensifying like an instrument in its own right, deeper and deeper as the night moved by and the voices died away and the ice stopped rattling in the glasses.

It was like all of you were going together into the deepest cave in the world, leaving everything else behind except what

# EDNA by BARRY FISHLER







was, and he let the softest whisper of love dance across his reed until they both knew it was just for them, keeping the tears out of the lyric, letting them fall back to the place where he could deal with them later.

Over by the bar, a tall white girl sat by herself, the seat next to her empty save for her purse, and sipped at a tall drink. He felt the music escaping from his horn, swelling toward her even as he tried to pull the notes back in, so that its sad beauty took on a ragged quality new even to him.

God, it wasn't fair, how much she looked like Edna. The same long blond hair parted down the middle like all the white chicks did back then. The same pale skin, hardly seemed a body could be alive, color like that, but there it was. Even the same kind of nose, stronger than you'd think would work on a face like that, but you wouldn't even notice the second you caught sight of those eyes, clear and direct, staring straight into your soul and just plain not giving a fuck what anyone thought.

Somehow, he knew her date would be black even before he got back from the john. Just like he knew nobody would care. Not like then, and he turned the sweet trill of the chorus into a melancholy cry of anguish he might have seen turn every head in the club had his own eyes still been open.

He hadn't been looking for it, not any of it, and his horn began to produce a song of protest. He could feel it swirling through the club, coloring everything he'd been trying to tell them for the past two hours.

Oh, but she didn't care, did she? Not during that time when they all thought the country was being remade and there would be no more Emmitt Tills or Mack Parkers, no more dogs and fire hoses, no more uppity niggerboys swinging from trees, no more grinning cracker sheriffs stuffing the Red Man into their smirking faces while they waited for the jury to let them go. No, it would be *different* now, don't you see, and for a while it was, and the joy came out in his playing in a way it never had before, not ever, and the truth of what he had always believed he could do bloomed, finally, in his sound, and suddenly everyone wanted to hear the young man from St Louis blow joy and love and sorrow like it had never been heard before in this lifetime.

Oh, those were the times, and for a few minutes he could feel them like they were real, and his mouth surged to the reed in excitement, with Deke and Connie and Melvin roaring in underneath him like the engine of the most beautiful new Chevy convertible in the world, until everyone in the club could feel the music that a warm June evening and an open car made with your girl's golden hair swirling in the wind as you rolled down Route 50, not too fast Lord knows because even though you were off the Eastern shore and not that far from Washington it was still Maryland and still 1965 and you couldn't be too careful so when the big pickup truck exploded up in your rearview you knew oh Jesus you knew and no kind of music could capture the fear now coming up faster and faster with more hate in their eyes than you ever thought possible, ramming you toward the shoulder *no oh shit look out* and there was screaming maybe him too and then they were all of them back in the woods, he and Edna and the three Cambridge boys who'd been following, mouths curling with their evil questions what you doin' with her, boy, and even worse what you doin' with *him*, girl, the two of them backed against a tree and suddenly there was a rope and he braced himself for what was coming when he guessed the rock hit him and there was darkness, darkness . . . waking up to a splash around his head and the smell, oh Lord they had pissed on him and the grinning voice in his ear telling him about lessons and something he'd remember always and

he didn't understand because always was when he'd be *dead* and then a scream to open your *eyes* boy and *remember* and Edna was going up, up, up toward the top of the tree, her white legs kicking and the gurgling screams trying to work out from behind the rag and the sight he would never forget of her one breast showing free beneath the torn blouse and the laughter ringing in the trees as the truck tires squealed and he was all alone at last, his own ropes trailing behind him as he crawled across the forest floor, screaming now over and over, Edna's lifeless body swinging above him, her golden hair glowing in the moonlight and the music slamming in his ears was something he'd never heard before.

He opened his eyes and the screaming did not stop. Tables were overturned, and in the spaces between them, people wrestled in broken glass and their own blood. Jasmine saw the woman in the cream dress rush by, her face flushed with excitement, her hand grasping a broken chair leg. He saw a light bulb explode. He kept on playing.

Jasmine turned around, his music never stopping. He saw Deke hunched over the keyboard, his thin shoulders shaking with the beat and his fingers grinding into the keys, his eyes rolled up, flat and lifeless, staring at Jasmine through the lenses of his glasses. He saw Connie pounding away, his hand stroking up and down the neck of his bass and his mouth opened in a silent scream of passion and outrage and hate. He saw Melvin, torso as motionless as ever, only his hands and feet moving, all bass and tom-toms, pounding a tattoo that would never stop. All of them together. So tight. Like always. He kept on playing.

He turned again and walked through the club, his shoes crunching on the broken glass. He paused beside the woman in the cream dress, who was straddling the tall white girl who had once stood at the bar. It wasn't Edna. The woman was beating on the girl with the chair leg, so that the pale white skin glistened with blood. He could hear the swish of the weapon, the dull crunching sound as it hit home. For a few seconds, he played along, the music dancing from his horn in perfect round notes that he could watch rise to the ceiling, *good* notes, leaping free of the horn that had confined them for decades, swirling into the club, out of the doorway, into the night. He kept on playing.

Jasmine moved into the doorway, grateful for the cool breeze, and stood there looking out at the city, his dark shape framed by wood and glass. From his horn came a last angry shout and a great gaping wound of a glissando as he handed off to what he thought was a faraway trumpet. From inside he could still hear the driving sounds of Deke's piano and the mad rhythms bouncing between Connie and Melvin. Melvin was pushing the brushes hard now, and he could feel their bristles moving back and forth, back and forth, demonic hisses against the burning surface of his soul. His tongue trailed idly across his reed, his toe tapped lightly inside his shoe, his lips moved gently against his mouthpiece, listening for the trumpet lead, feeling the jam, swaying to the music, everywhere now, so that he could hear the trumpet as clearly as his own horn, crying a song as old as man, as old as his gods.

Jasmine listened and watched, the dark flesh of his face bathed in red, eyes alive with wonder, as the first buildings began to topple and burn.

Barry Fishler lives in Seattle, Washington, where he writes direct response advertising and scary – he hopes – stories and where the winter weather, his Cambridge-educated wife assures him, is often reminiscent of England. This is his second story for TTA. 'Heart-strings', which appeared in TTA19, was nominated for the British Fantasy Award.





# WORLDS OF CASUAL INSANITY

Steve Aylett's new novel *Only an Alligator* is a colourful departure from the Beerlight universe. Accomplice is a city like no other  
**Interview by Iain Emsley**

**Steve Aylett has built up quite a reputation** as a cult writer whose novels deliver short, sharp, ideas-rich narratives. The writing has been described as a heavy decompression experience, where the reader must re-acclimatise to normal life. The Beerlight novels, such as *Atom* and *Slaughter-matic*, have been published to acclaim. He has recently published a collection of short stories, *Toxicology*, and a novella, *Shamanspace*. His next novel, *Only an Alligator*, is published in January and set in the new polychrome city of Accomplice.

In the UK edition of *Toxicology*, there are a few extra stories not in the US edition. "It was just something I agreed to do for Orion, ages ago – to add some stories. A lot of the stories in there are good satire, a couple are just clever, some are rants, and about a quarter are light bits of humour. There's a couple of PG Wodehouse parodies, and you can't get any lighter than that. I like to just write stupid stuff sometimes. Readers can change gears easily, they're smart. The thing that's common to all the stories, and all my writing, is that it doesn't waste time.

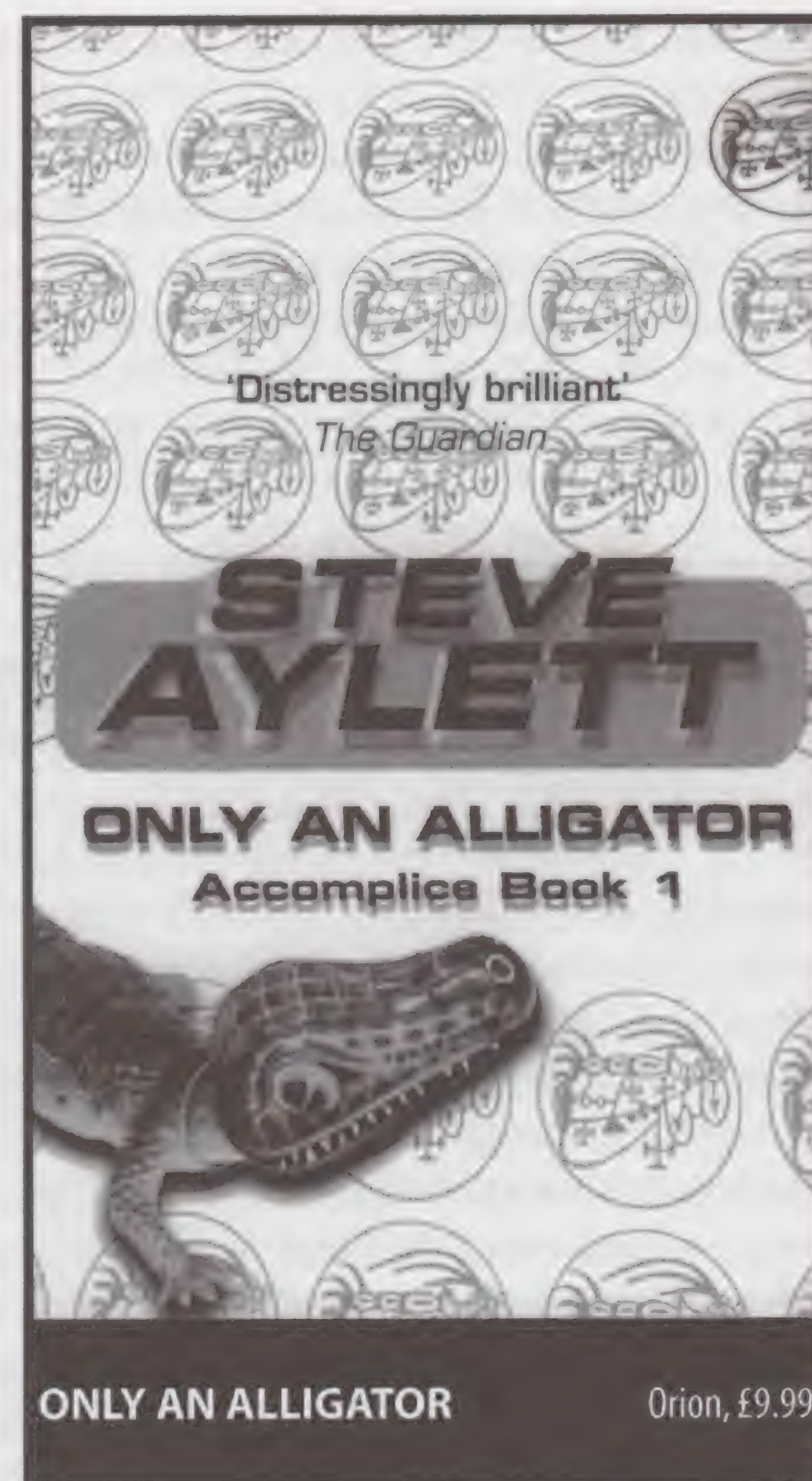
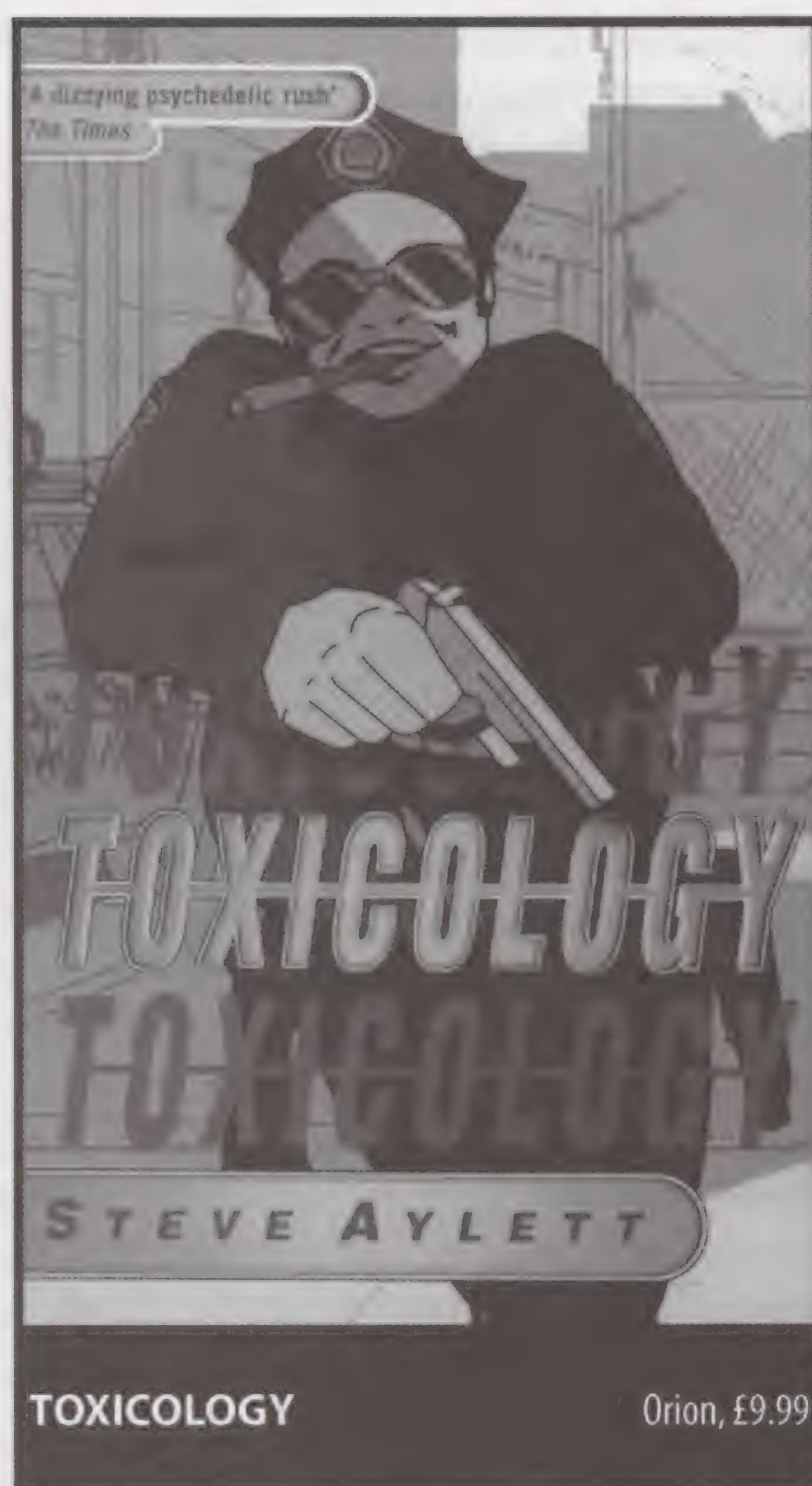
"Most books are stillborn. I write books that I wanted to find out there but couldn't find. I write for myself, and luckily some other people like the stuff as well. It insists on leaving out the obvious, and the shapes that are left make sense to some people and not to others, depending on whether they've worked out that basic stuff or not. I suppose I make a working assumption that the reader has read maybe a few thousand books before reading mine, so in some ways I start beyond that, assuming that the obvious at least has been digested – we can move on a little bit, or use that stuff for jokes at least. It would be good to keep getting denser and more colourful, until the colours become so saturated they start becoming colours that don't have words attached to them – but no one will admit they don't. Some people already react like it's antimatter and they don't consciously know why. All you have to do to stand out in today's literary scene is to be detectably alive.

"I don't know of anything interesting happening. Things are always fairly bland but culturally there are cycles of greater blandness, where it becomes a kind of wasteland. The last time was the eighties, and now in the zeros we're into another one. We've got about another ten years of it. The important thing is not to let it waste your time."

In contrast to some of his contemporaries, Aylett takes a slightly more political stance with his dealings with the chemical generation, such as in 'Repeater' where the law outlaws repetitive beats, yet true crime is too mundane to be outlawed; or the bombing in Sudan or Iraq in 'Shifa'.

"All the satire I do is about manipulation, the powerlessness of most people and the contortions people go through to avoid





knowing that. Hypocrisy is a machine – I can see the shape of it, the mechanisms in it – and it's possible to mess with it so that it reverses its action. 'Shifa' is about retaliation and punishment, and how certain principles are applied very selectively. I like the idea of consequences and justice, and calling bluff. In *The Crime Studio* there was that whole thing about the hazards of asking people to repay their debt to society – people often take the advice and go on a vengeful rampage. In *Shamanspace* there's talk of 'the forgiveness of god', but of course nobody can forgive it – you can see *Shamanspace* as talking about people and government rather than subject and god.

"Justice is a great fantasy, consequence is great – in 'Gigantic', all those bodies refusing to be forgotten. Billions of murders to be accounted for. I like to take people into the consequences of their argument. To show what would happen if it wasn't applied selectively, or by a different selection process. So in 'Shifa' there's the bombing of a building full of innocent people and medicines, the punching of innocent pillows, the punching of guilty and innocent people, the execution of guilty and innocent people. Is it okay to hit the wrong person, or the right person? Is it okay to bomb the wrong person, or the right person? To execute the wrong person? I like that sort of thing. And in regard to powerlessness, most people are powerless under government, and everyone is powerless in the face of death. And I don't see the point of pretending otherwise, even for a second. That's why I like scenes of broken protocol, played as if it matters. In the comic stuff I do, there's always these people who stand up in the middle of dinner or something

and pull their own face off or start fighting with a swan which has suddenly appeared out of nowhere and is wearing some kind of breathing apparatus, and he and the swan are laughing throughout the procedure, and a purple gas is forming the face of Walter Matthau on the ceiling. It's something to do with people's desire to ignore extremity. I find that funny, extremity of circumstance, and people who live that way all the time. Even in *Shamanspace*, which isn't very funny, there's the scene where Alix is being crucified and tortured, and the text stops to tell us 'It was a Saturday'. Here's what this bloke does on a Saturday morning. Living with the constant awareness of absolute extremity."

Aylett's writing has been compared to Jeff Noon. Is he an influence at all? "The comparison to Jeff Noon is very lazy. His stuff isn't an influence. My stuff's satire – except for *The Inflatable Volunteer*, which is nonsense – and just very different in a lot of basic ways. I like Jeff a lot as a person, he's about ten years older than me and probably ten years wiser, and he does what he wants, basically. He's not beholden. I think he's cool. But we're very different writers. My influences are real satirists like Voltaire, Bierce and other people who grew their own minds from scratch. I like people who are smart enough to be disappointed. I also find them very funny."

How did *Shamanspace* come about? "In interviews and stuff I used to sometimes complain that readers weren't seeing past the jokes and 'special effects' to what I was talking about, and I kept threatening to write a book with all the gags stripped out, for the hard of reading. Then I was asked to write a novella. For about eight years I'd had the idea lying around for this

'edgemen' novel, so I did the thing, quite slowly over a few months. It was only a small novella but even denser than usual. I managed to *underwrite*, in fact. There's still a few jokes in there but not many. Several headfucks per page of course. Codex published it and did a fine job.

"*Shamanspace* posits how things would be if a group of people discovered that god existed and that revenge was possible. One faction believes its death will mean the end of everything, the other believes the universe will continue regardless. A splinter group thinks god should be tortured before death. Anyway there's a race of all these assassins to get there. So the whole thing asks, what if a person really could have a significant effect on things with his thoughts or actions? In that sense it really is science fiction. To me it's evident that if god's existence were ever proved, and some crucial mass of it were located, it should be punished in the most painful way devised, even if it meant the end of everything. If you don't think so, you've been living without due attention."

Alix has to be distracted, so that he does not become an Ironaut. Is this something Aylett sees in the culture around him? That it has become ironic and thus distracted from what is currently going around it? "I think it's become stupid and blurred, and the notion of irony is a cover-story for that. But in *Shamanspace* that character is very smart – what he lacks is a focus of anger. He's become too into his image as the big hero and that threatens the success of the hit. He needs to be reminded why god deserves to die.

"In terms of the trips – if you've got a certain kind of head it isn't necessary to take a drug to experience that. Some people



love the familiarity of that stuff when Alix takes off out of his body and hovers off behind the front of things, and twists into cross-sections of landscapes – it's something some people can do. The narrative gets a different buzz in those sequences."

Grant Morrison has provided some effusive praise for *Shamanspace*. How would Aylett react to the statement that it is 'a bible for the 21st Century...if you've been waiting for the first neo-modernist novelist of the twenty-first century...your wait is now over'? "I'm not sure what 'neo-modernist' means. As for a bible, I wouldn't want it to be that. The only advice I would give is not to waste any energy pretending anything. In terms of judging it at a literary level, I like it for its controlled expression of protest and anger. There's something interesting about people who are so completely articulate about their rage. It feels like poison. Grant described it to me another time as like a negative image of *The Invisibles*, like the *Invisibles* stuff on downers. That's nice because he's one of the few creative people I admire, Billy Childish being one other that comes to mind."

The *Shamanspace* website (www.sham

anspace.com) seems to expand upon the novella providing much background in the links or expanding the 'history'. Was this site meant to be a stepping point for those more curious (with its link to killgod.net, gnosticism, western magic, and so on)? "The *Shamanspace* site is a carry-over from the book, talking about their history and books, adding to it. It's a bit of strange fun."

Is he likely to return to Edgemen in the future? "I may do another edgemen thing but it takes ages to draw that density together, it's like creating a heavy black hole."

Aylett's new novel *Only an Alligator* is a colourful departure from the Beerlight universe. *Accomplice* is a city like no other. Mayor Gallo is locked into an eternal re-election process, Barney Juno is being persecuted for walking around with an alligator, and the demon Sweeney is tired of his normal diet of souls. The novel reads slightly more slowly than usual but the ideas are more viscous. Will this continue, or is there a deliberate reason for the change? "I did the first Beerlight stuff about ten years ago now, and I felt like doing something with a different colour to it. The *Accomplice* stuff looks very loose while

being really close-wired and densely codified. The result is something rich and fertile, and nice to roll around in. You go into it fast, thinking it's casual and knockabout, then slow suddenly as you find yourself in the middle of all this stuff. It has a lot of frazzling acidic colours in it, and also an *Alice in Wonderland* feel. I like putting down the seeds of a load of ideas in a pattern, the way someone plants a maze. The *Accomplice* books are quite pastoral, there's a lot of sheds. I like the shabby almost-pastoral thing, rusted corrugated iron, audio tape tangled in the bushes, that sort of thing. And everything is representative – the Gubba Men, the statues which grab you and hold you in place if you go to them for help, will be familiar to anyone who's been involved with the police and legal process. The moral fibre, the slowly growing courthouse, all those things are concepts put into physical fixtures, which operate consistently throughout the books. At the basic knockabout level it's a sort of Struwwelpeter or Punch & Judy thing, complete with snappy reptile. I think animals are really funny. I will do another Beerlight book later on, though."

## JEFF LINT

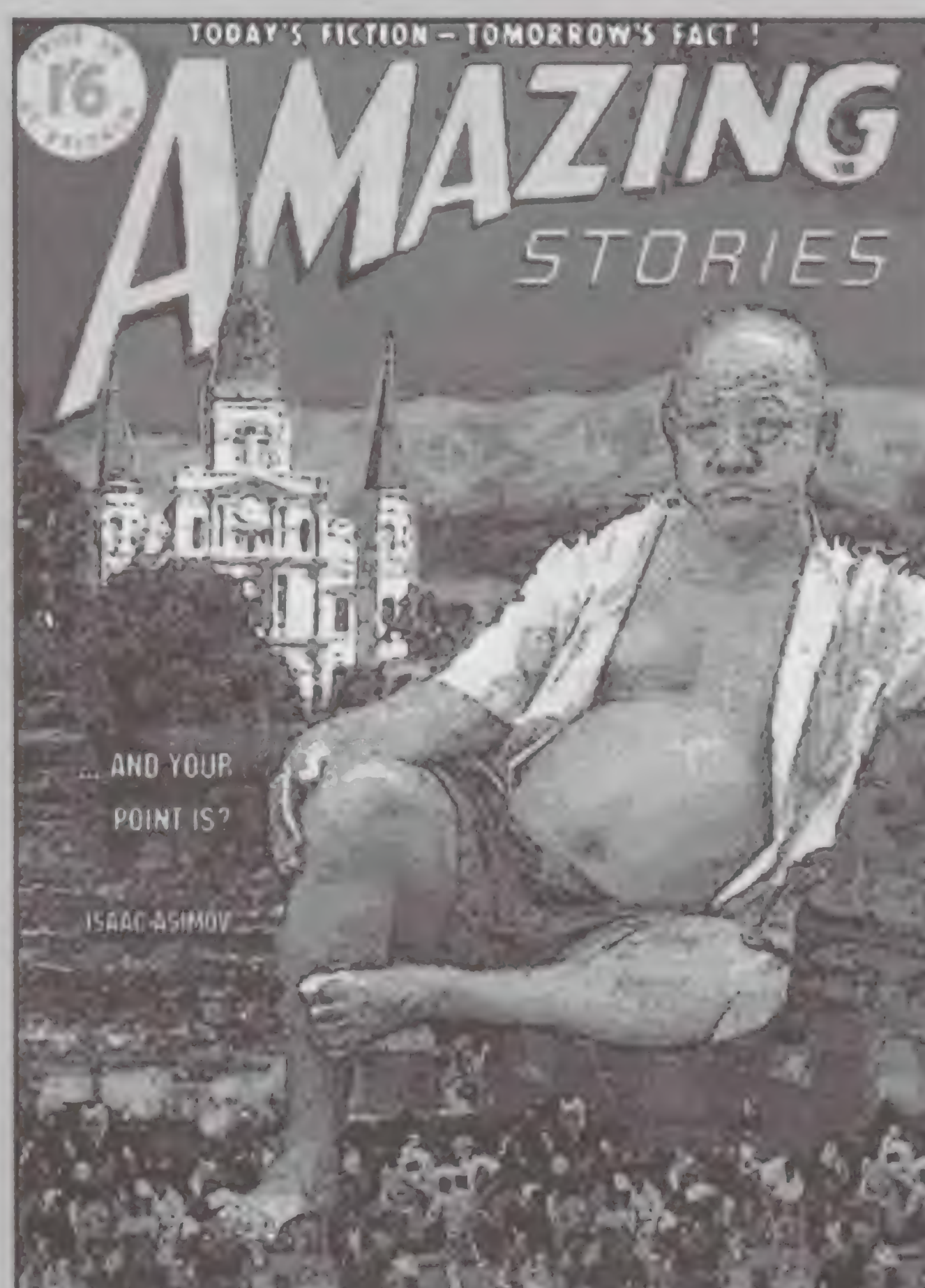
### THE BURST SOFA OF PULP

AN UNOFFICIAL BIOGRAPHY BY  
STEVE AYLETT

**Pulp sci-fi author Jeff Lint has loomed** large as an influence on my own work since I found a scarred copy of *I Blame Ferns* in a Charing Cross basement, an apparently baffled chef staring from the cover. After that I hunted down all the Lint stuff I could find and became a connoisseur of the subtly varying blank stares of booksellers throughout the world.

Born in Chicago in 1929, Jeff (or Jack) Lint submitted his first story to the pulps during a childhood spent in Santa Fe. His first published effort appeared in a wartime edition of *Amazing Stories* because Lint submitted it under the name 'Isaac Asimov'. 'And Your Point Is?' tells the story of an unpopularly calm tramp who is pelted every day with rocks, from which he slowly builds a fine house. The story already reflected the notion of 'effortless incitement' which Lint would practice as an adult. "Jack was fantastic," says friend Tony Fleece. "Went around blessing people – knew it was the most annoying thing he could do. A dozen times, strangers just beat the hell out of him." Lint perfected the technique when he stumbled upon the notion of praying for people.

Lint's first novel was published by Dean



Rodence's Never company in New York. The relationship between Rodence and Lint was one of complete mistrust, rage and bloody violence. When submitting work in person, Lint insisted on appearing dressed as some kind of majorette. "He was a large man and clearly wasn't happy at having to do this," explains Fleece. "He blamed Rodence, was resentful. I still don't know where he got the idea he had to dress that way when handing his stuff in."

The first novel with Never was *One Less Person Lying*, in which Billy Stem must tell the truth or be transformed into the average man. Rodence persuaded Lint to change the title word 'Person' to 'Bastard'. On a night of pre-press jitters, Rodence then partially rewrote the final sections of the book so that Stem puts on a spacesuit and goes berserk,

killing an innocent stranger with a large rock. The book was published as simply *One Less Bastard*. In the twenty-five years of their association Lint never forgave Rodence for the incident, and often alluded to it by repeated use of the word 'bastard' when speaking to him.

Around the time of his second published novel *Cheerful When Blamed*, Lint met his first wife Madeline, who was attracted to him by a knife scar which led from below his left eye to his mouth. This was in fact a sleep crease and Lint managed to maintain the mistake by napping through most of the marriage. But after five months a bout of insomnia put paid to the relationship and left Lint with nothing to occupy his time but his writing – luckily for the world of literature, as he produced some of his best work at this time, including *Jelly Result*, *Nose Furnace*, *Slogan Love* and *I Eat Fog*, all of which appeared on Rodence's new Furtive Labors imprint. *Turn Me Into a Parrot* took issue with the fundamentalist notion that the world was only a few thousand years old and that dinosaur bones had been planted by god to test man's faith. Lint asserted that the world was only sixty years old and that the mischievous god had buried sewers, unexploded bombs and billions of people. In my own book *Shamanspace* I make it clear that humanity arrived eons ago but, like a man standing in front of an open fridge, has forgotten why.

By the sixties Lint's reputation was established firmly enough for several feuds to develop with other equally unknown authors, the main one being Cameo Herzog, creator of the *Empty Trumpet* books, who once conspired with Rodence to kill Lint with a truck.



In *Only an Alligator* there is a running riff about the title of the book on dogs that keeps being shifted back and changing, ostensibly for marketing reasons. Does this mark Aylett's cynicism towards the whole publishing industry, that a book cannot just be written, it must also have a marketing angle that interferes, in this case, with the actual production of the book? "I haven't had to feel any cynicism about the marketing of my own books because none has ever been done. Orion have said they'll do something for *Only an Alligator*, but I've yet to see it. In a way I suppose things have been simplified by the fact that my books are just pushed out there." He's certainly built up serious word of mouth and reviews. "My stuff just turns up and there aren't any prior claims about it, I suppose. People either read it or not."

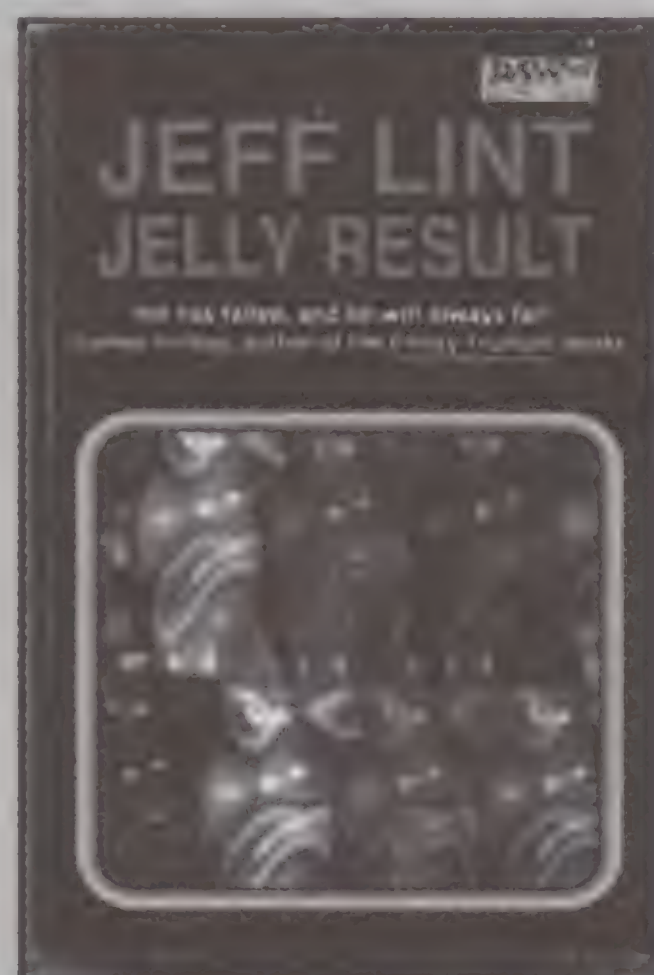
The Mayor is running for re-election with a battery of vacuous promises that do not amount to anything. While this is carrying on, he tries to get the newspapers on side with him against Barny. Was this written as a riposte to the recent elections in the UK and the US? Or the manipulation of the election media by various pressure groups

to avoid real issues and to achieve their own aims? "It was written a long time before those US elections, and that particular part of the story was there for storyline rather than satire, because the media-herding matter is obvious and doesn't really need saying. Story is just foreground, and the least interesting level to me."

I've read some of Aylett's pessimistic, though accurate, views about the current state of the internet. "My main complaints about the net have been technical – that it's very slow, fragile, buggy, frustrating, and very often just doesn't work, while still being very expensive. The other thing is that, like the other media, it's a swamp of lies mixed with a few facts, but there's much more of it. People don't have the resources to get independent first-hand confirmation of anything, so they just wade around in this bigger, newer swamp." I notice that he's put up various interviews and links on his website ([www.steveaylett.com](http://www.steveaylett.com)). "The interviews section was an experiment to show what was actually said, so that people could compare that with what was printed if they wanted, and see how answers and questions get rewritten

sometimes. It's me being really anal."

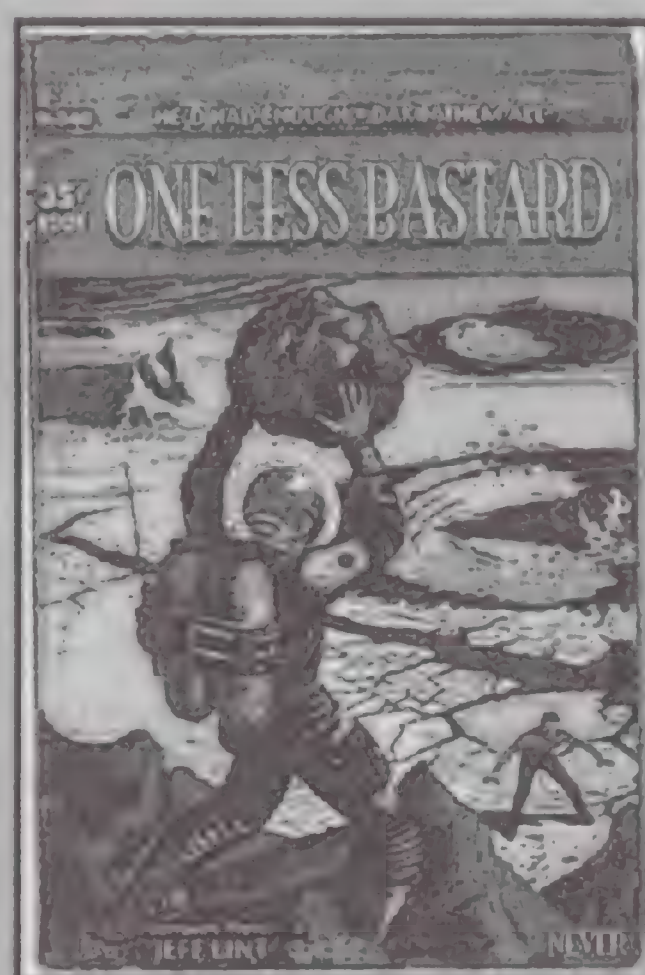
Aylett has recorded with the industrial group Hellbent. Is there a difference in the spoken and written media, in terms of construction or delivery? "When I do readings I tend to act the stuff out a lot and do a sort of stand-up routine, stacatto stuff. I don't do so many readings now because it does my head in a bit, I'm quite private and going into performance mode is a bit strange. But it should be a performance, rather than just droning at people, which is insulting to them. With Hellbent I recorded a couple of rants for Bryan Black and he made two tracks from them – I think the worst one was used on the album, I liked the other one about hunting bears due to a misconception as to how big they are, thinking bears are as small as their picture in a book, and taking a wicker basket to collect them in. Bryan Black's a nice bloke. Anyway, since then I've started getting stuff together for a project with Steven Severin's RE label. I got more into doing the music than the voice stuff, for some reason. I finally recorded some voice stuff the other day. I don't know what will happen with any of this."



(The story is unclear, but it seems they killed or injured the wrong man and had to make reparation to the mob.) The levels to which this feud imploded were difficult for outsiders to understand. Lint and Herzog were once

seen glaring silently at each other for seven hours in a freezing lot, each holding a differently coloured swatch of velvet. In an interview with *Bloody Fantastic Idea*, Lint spun the notion that since crustaceans were skeletons containing meat and mammals were meat containing skeletons, then since the bones of human beings enclosed organs and marrow, humans were in fact crustaceans. In a subsequent issue Herzog countered that calcium traces in organs and marrow technically constituted a central bone system and that we were mammals after all. Impressed, Lint agreed. Herzog was unable to accept this turn of events and ran amok with some kind of rubber hose until police cornered him in a slaughterhouse. Lint had to help the cops by insisting through a megaphone that Herzog was wrong – within calcium were atomic particulates of carbon molecules and so on. Herzog gave himself up, his hose was confiscated and he was led away swearing revenge. While on parole he wrote several letters to the *Boston Globe* declaring that Lint was a 'rogue maniac' published only through criminal indulgence. "Shoot me if I ever write like that."

When Herzog's body was found a year later, his forehead containing a 9mm Para-



bellum slug, Lint was hauled in as the key suspect. But his surprised laughter upon hearing of the incident was so clearly honest, the police felt foolish (and reportedly 'soiled') in holding him.

At this time Lint published a series of essays under the ominous collective title *Prepare to Learn*. This included 'Running Bent Double – The Poor Man's Protest', 'Debate This, You Mother' and 'My Beauty Will Blind You', in which he stated: "Some animals have a lifespan of only a few days. I suspect they eat food only through habit. Why has nature never bred a creature which eats nothing for its few days of life? Such hordes would have a distinct advantage over other species." He then suggests that humanity was meant to be such a species but wrecked everything by stuffing its face the moment it entered the world.

Several of Lint's early books were also being re-published by Doubleday and New English Library, and the startled Lint rushed to exploit his raised profile, pulling on a skirt and bursting into the offices of Random House with a proposal he dreamed up on the spot. *Banish m'Colleagues* would tell the story of a bull elephant on its way to the elephants' graveyard, only to find it full of ambulances. The ivory-white confusion of the landscape is a classic Lint image, as is that of Lint being ejected from Random House by twelve security guards. In 1973 Lint instead batted out the trash novel *Sadly*



*Disappointed* about a child who is not possessed by the devil. Published under his Asimov pen name, it is a minor work redeemed only by the parents' laughable attempts at activism. These seem mainly to involve the

placing of ignorable gonks on people's driveways – the baffled press is then alerted when the toy is backed over by a car.

Lint was by now a Hemingwayesque figure and had developed the ability to speak from a different part of his beard each time. "Keep 'em guessing," he rumbled.

After a second marriage and short stints in London, Paris and Tangiers, Lint returned to the New Mexico of his childhood and produced the first book of his *Easy Prophecy* series, *Die Miami*, which many say was a decoy for more interesting work as yet unearthed. He lived there until his death in 1994, since when Lint scholars have hunted for the gold-dust of lost stories, endlessly analysing the last novel *Clowns and Locusts*, his thankfully incomplete attempt at autobiography *The Man Who Gave Birth to His Arse*, and his whispered final words, which seem to have been "There's no marrying a cat."

Jeff Lint is buried in a Taos graveyard, his headstone bearing the epitaph: DON'T THINK OF IT AS A PROBLEM, BUT AS A CHALLENGE WHICH HAS DEFEATED YOU.

Visit Steve Aylett's message board at [www.ttapress.com/message.html](http://www.ttapress.com/message.html)



**Yessirree, that Jellyfish Man is more, much more, than a** dirty old man, why he's one medical marvel of bio-engineering. There he goes now, a-rollin down that rotting roadway on his aluminum dolly, paddling with those stunted flippertip-hands, humping each and every pothole to his artificial heart's content. It's better than feeling up a girl, says he, the way his implants release those chemicals he calls endorfins from his whorefins.

Not too many like him these days. Most folks get their bones replaced with fancy schmancy alloys that let them stand proud, stand tall. Not so the Jellyfish Man, who thinks living low to the ground is just fine. He's pleased the ratty Uprights look down on him, disgusted with his tubes that suck up just what he needs from the ground. They don't like it, that's their problem, not his. No regrets, he likes to brag. No regrets at all.

He rolls over pavement, his innards protected from the elements by a thick and shiny coating that the doctors say was modeled after sharkskin. He fast-humps the rain-slick street like she was some Tijuana whore and not just oily asphalt laid by city workers back in those days when the city had workers. But lately he hasn't felt too good and that's why he scheduled an adjustment with the doctor. He rolls up to the stop where a black tank waits to take him to the VA hospital. A uniformed chauffeur will drive him and another old guy, an Upright named Joe. That tank is government

shiny and outfitted with the latest and greatest available.

They move along. The Jellyfish Man can't even feel the ratty bumps along the road. To *get off*, he must hump a seatbelt buckle that's fallen to the floor-mat.

What a waste of a drive through this fine city, says he.

Upright Joe, sitting behind him, leans forward to ask, You call this fine? The country's gone to hell and it's all our fault for getting so old, for costing so much. Sometimes I wonder if we're doing right by living. Let me ask you somethin, says he. Ain't you ever bored down there? Don't you miss lookin out the window? Kissin your old lady?

Maybe I'll miss her in a week from Tuesday, says the Jellyfish Man.

Next week is the Thanksgiving, when he'll go to his daughter's — Ms Upright's — place. Not for dinner mind you, just to talk. That ingrate girl don't think of having him over to eat. If his son was still alive, he'd make damn sure his Pop got a home-cooked supper now and again. Not that daughter, though, who still blames him for the accident that took her brother. Wasn't even his fault about the boy; it was the hospital's. After all, they managed to save the Jellyfish Man now, didn't they? So whose fault was it that the boy died? Not his, and that's for sure. Should have sued and made them pay when he had the chance. A man ain't supposed to outlive his child, why it was just plain wrong.

# THAT JELLYFISH man keeps a-ROLLIN





He and Upright Joe get to be roommates, and in a couple of hours time, maybe even pals. And why not? They share something in common — why they're veterans! They fought hard for their country and now their country fights hard for them. Mealtimes, Upright Joe perches on the edge of the bed to eat his food from a tray while the Jellyfish Man sucks dustballs and silverfish from the floor. The both of them have talked their doctors into writing prescriptions for government surplus muscatel. The Jellyfish Man slurps his up so fast he has to ask Upright Joe to pour a wee bit more from his bottle.

Just a little, says Upright Joe sounding resentful. They start a-talking and Upright Joe admits he's worried because he's been losing weight no matter how much food he eats.

Pity for him, thinks the Jellyfish Man, but nothing I can do about it anyway. Despite the drinking he has a hard time getting to sleep. He wonders if Upright Joe is awake right now, worrying about his surgery. These things usually don't get to him the way it does right now, and he doesn't understand the feeling. Worst that could happen: he could die, and so what? He don't care, and no one else does, neither. Nah, it must be something else, maybe just indigestion. Seems to take forever before morning and time to go under the knife.

See you on the outside, Upright Joe calls from his stretcher. He'll be done quicker than the Jellyfish Man, who is a touch more complicated case.

know better.

Not any more, says the Jellyfish Man. Not any more. You want out of here you got to be a little more creative.

He and the driver have what the Jellyfish Man thinks is a good laugh over that one, but later, when the driver helps him down, he dumps the Jellyfish Man on the street, twisting a dolly wheel out of alignment before the alarm goes off.

What's happening here? asks a videocopper. Everything all right?

It was an accident, the driver says. I'm sorry, he says, but you can tell he isn't really.

Pity for them all. Uprights gotta work till they're a kazillion on account of old slobs costing so much money, thinks that Jellyfish Man. Well, isn't that a shame? Should have thought of that before.

He starts toward his place under the bridge, but dammit, if it isn't Thanksgiving Day, and already time to go uptown. His daughter has told him to come before two, as she's somewhere to go that evening. She tried real hard to make him come another day, but he insisted. He'll be damned to spend Thanksgiving all alone.

A videocopper slows an Upright transport to let the Jellyfish Man cross the street. When the Jellyfish Man jumps the curb his belly does a little flip-flop, so he slows down to let the nausea pass. He ought to be relaxed from all the muscatel,

## BY LESLIE WHAT

The nurse pushes the Jellyfish Man back to the operating room where a doctor asks, You want any anaesthetic this time?

No, says the Jellyfish Man. He likes to feel each cut; gives him a bigger rush than pussy-humping on cocaine. The doctor aims his scalpel, asks the nurse to hold the retractors.

Wider, says the Jellyfish Man. He moans and groans as his arteries get routed out by some kazillion-dollar device that's no more than an overpriced ramrod, medical-grade.

Yeah, baby, says the Jellyfish Man. Yeah, Baby. After they sew him back up, he hears the nurse run to the sink and spill her guts. Pity the poor Uprights and their delicate stomachs; ain't his job to make things any easier for them.

By the time he gets back to the room, Upright Joe is gone. He wants to ask the nurses about Upright Joe, but not a one of them will talk to him. Odd, being surrounded by all these bodies and still feeling so alone.

After several days and several bottles, the nurses tell him it's check-out time. We're closing early for the Holiday, says they. Everybody's got to go home to eat their turkey.

Who needs turkey when the government will buy your muscatel? says the Jellyfish Man.

The nurses give him a goodbye drink and wish him lots of luck on the outside. The tank is waiting in front of the building; the driver helps him up. The Jellyfish Man can't wait to hear the latest gossip. So, whatever happened to the other guy? says he.

Old Joe? the driver says. Killed hisself day before yesterday. Some men can't be satisfied, no matter what.

Suicide, the old man's friend, says the Jellyfish Man. Despite himself, he misses Upright Joe.

Thought the old man's friend was what they called pneumonia, says the driver, who is still on his first life and don't

but the Jellyfish Man feels squeezed, like he's eaten something he can't quite digest. Probably just nervous. After all, the Jellyfish Man hasn't seen his daughter in some time. Maybe long enough the old girl even misses him.

Forward, rolling forward. The Jellyfish Man pulls close behind an Upright, who breaks into a jog. The guy must be going home to dinner; a chunk of bloody something falls to the ground.

Thanksgiving dinner. Yum, yum. Sure smells fine.

Before the Upright can turn back, the Jellyfish Man is all over the scrap of meat, flippers brushing against fur, blood, and gobs of creamy white fat.

Pity for the starving Upright, but finders keepers.

Besides, he figures, why should I find my own food when I can get an Upright to do it for me?

With that, the Jellyfish Man sucks everything up through his feeding tubes. The Upright screams *stop* and the Jellyfish Man feels the cold from his shadow even before he feels the kick. A videocopper in an armored box shouts, Move along and leave that old man alone in his misery, so nothing else happens.

I'm sure you'll find some turkey, the Jellyfish Man tells the Upright. If not tonight then maybe in a week from Tuesday.

His innards ache, but pain never slows him down. Then he feels something heavy hit him on the back: the ratty Upright has gone and thrown a brick. A pressure valve bursts, shooting high-tech snot all over the cracked cement. Add that to the list of things to be repaired during the next adjustment. But first things first and now it's off to see that daughter, see if she's changed her tune about her old man.

The videocopper's lights are shining every which way. The Jellyfish Man spies a leathery maple leaf and scoots that way.





Pretty thing — how it sweats in the rain, the edges all curled up — reminds him of lace undies. Feels good under his wheels, fragile yet crunchy. Been a cold winter, though the Jellyfish Man never bothers about the weather. Ratty Uprights are the only ones who care about staying warm.

Trash is piled up on the sidewalk to his right and even though he's running late, the glint of something sharp pokes out through the rubble and beckons like a painted woman. Slow down, he tells himself. Take time smelling them ratty roses. He jumps the curb and practically comes right there from the jolt. He humps that pile of trash, back and forth, back and forth, trying his best to hit the sharpies head-on.

Hey baby, says he. Nice to meet you.

His belly flops over the edge of the dolly he leased from the VA. There's only the one condition (like there always is with the VA) — that the lease be renewed every ninety-nine years, give or take. The Jellyfish Man knows the government's gotta have rules and regulations or it wouldn't be the government. As it was, he had quite a time convincing the VA to replace the standard-issue alloy wheels on his dolly with antique wooden casters. The old style let him feel the shock of the roadways much better than those high-falootin technological dickfors. Funny how old things cost so much more than something new, but that's the government for you, chargin you aplenty for peanuts and givin away the caviar for free.



Onward he travels, dipping into potholes, rising over bumps that trigger off pain and pleasure sensors on the order of once every fifteen seconds. The feeling is one of being prodded by electrical currents, but hey, at his age, the Jellyfish Man figures you take whatever you can without complaining. He swerves to hump some refuse that's started to go bad. He's grown to love the taste of scrap iron and swill, the sour smell of wet paper.

It don't get no better than this.

He heads into an alley belly-high in litter and broken bottles, and bumps along past his old house. The house has been turned into a Factory Training Center for Upright kids, what they used to call a school back in his day.

Glad they found a use for it. Never did like that house anyway. Wife, Delores, picked it out. Stupid woman. Pity for her. Died the day before they come out with immortality. Bet she woulda had her bones redone with that trendy liquid metal crap instead of silicone, just so's she could tower over him for eternity. If you asked him, the Jellyfish Man would tell you he really don't miss her much.

Hell, she'd stopped givin it to him since the menopause. Yessirree, when he thinks about it he's glad that woman's too dead to give him more of the same Homo Erectus shit instead of what he really wants. Now there's just the daughter, who is bossier than her mother ever knew how. He tells himself he's only going so as not to hurt her feelings, it being a holiday, and all. He sure don't love that brat, her and her ratty Upright sensibilities. Still, now and then he's tempted to give her another chance. She is his only family, after all.

Pity his son had to go an die before the miracle of regeneration. Who could forgive doctors who didn't do a damn thing to save the boy's life? The Jellyfish Man sometimes wonders

if things might have been a little different had his son survived that car crash. The wife blamed him, said it was his fault for drinking, said he was the one who deserved to die. Everybody blamed him for all their troubles. Bet ya if that old dead biddy could see him now, she'd be singing a different tune!

Uprights. Hump 'em all. They could keep their never-ending jobs, decrepit commuter transports, sardine can apartments. The Jellyfish Man likes things this way, likes living by himself under a bridge. Kind of back to the earth, primal even. He don't owe the world a thing.

He turns down the street that leads to his daughter's place and rolls on toward the building. He intimidates an Upright into holding the front door while he humps the threshold three or four times in a row.

That humping relieves some of the pressure that's been bugging him all morning, but then something new starts to crawl inside him. It's that daughter of his. What a pain she's turned out to be. Women. Who needs 'em, anyway?

The Upright calls for the elevator and the Jellyfish Man rolls a little too close to the guy's feet than is polite. This one's got real shoes, must be an executive. The Jellyfish Man reaches over to casually hump the leather with his flipper, greatly appreciating the chewy taste. His innards still gurgle from that bit of fatty meat and he's not surprised when the Upright decides against riding up with him and rushes off to take the stairs instead.

Lucky man. If he could, the Jellyfish Man would be humping along those steps himself going up and down, up and down. Up and down. Yessirree, that would be something.

Finally, the elevator door slides open and the Jellyfish Man gets on. The buttons are low enough and he presses every one to get as many bumps as possible. He rides on up to Maggie's floor and rolls toward to number 1512. The carpet smells like sanitized dirt, dogs, and talcum, but the texture is nice — soft but kind of scratchy.

Ahead of him the door opens and he spies Maggie's slender legs peeking out from her skirt. That gal is still single, though she's nearly sixty. She's had most of her bones and joints redone so she can keep doing her ballet. Says she'd work even if she didn't have to, but he don't believe that. Why would anybody work, if they had the choice?

How you doin, Pop?

He rolls into her place without an answer, sniffing out what's new and what's changed.

She don't say nothing for a long time so he figures it's hard for her to gather up her nerve and ask what she surely wants to ask: for her Pop to stay for dinner. Maybe what she needs is a shot of something to break the ice.

Got a drink for me? says he and he can feel a shudder in the floor as her toes pump the carpet through her shoes.

I don't think that's such a good idea, says she.

Come on, girlie. Why you gonna deny your old man his due? he asks.

He starts to roll around, bumping into the walls and leaving wet streaks against the paint. He sniffs everywhere to find her liquor until at last she gives in.

Okay, says she. Okay. What would you like?

Whiskey, says he. Put it in a glass bowl, not one of them aluminum pie tins. Leaves an aftertaste. Why even bother if it don't taste right? One of my few pleasures, says he, chortling, because he can't admit the other, her being his kid and all.

Yes, Pop, says she.

She goes to a cabinet and fiddles with the latch for what seems like forever before she gets around to pouring him something. She covers a square of carpet with blue plastic and slides the glass dish over that.



He rolls right over and sticks his flippers all the way inside that dish, desperate to suck up every last drop.

That sure is good, says he. Got any more?

A little, says she, but he can tell she's none too happy.

She don't like him drinking, but there's more to it than that. There's something she wants to tell him but dammit she don't say a word. Pretty soon, his stomach seizes up and he rolls around to get things working again.

Pour me another drink, says he, making his voice as loud as he can.

No more, says she, almost begging. That stuff is gonna kill you.

Unlikely, says he, but don't you wish? Maybe just a little? Nights especially, he wouldn't mind dying all that much himself.

She starts up crying and says, Please don't say that, Pop.

Girlie, says he, you know I'm only a-kiddin.

It's not very funny, says she, but she fills up the dish anyway.

She clears her throat like she's finally ready to speak. Pop, says she. She blows her nose and says, You got anywhere to go for Thanksgiving Turkey?

I knew it, says he, and for the first time all day his gut stops aching. That girl still loves him after all! First dinner and after that she's gonna ask him to live with her! He'd hate to admit to anyone how much he likes that idea, but really, it makes the most sense of anything. He does, at times, get lonely.

He rolls around in a circle that stops at her feet. He's feeling snug and warm inside, and not just from the whiskey. He looks around and chooses the corner by the window that will soon be his. I don't got nowhere to go, says he. Hint hint.

You ever think about asking somebody to take care of you? says she.

You got yourself a pretty nice place, he answers. Guess I

might not mind moving in, so long as you don't try to feed me any vegetables.

Then that Upright daughter of his gasps and stamps her foot.

No! says she and he sees a look of horror in her eyes. What do you mean stay with me? says she. What in the world are you talking about? Color drains from her face and stains the sleeve around her armpits like she's bleeding, except it's sweat.

His gut squeezes shut again and he tries to talk, but can't. At last he manages to whisper, You are asking me to come stay, ain't you?

No! she screams, and backs away. That's not what I meant. I was talkin about a home, Pop! Someplace nice where they'd take care of you, keep you clean and out of trouble. Someplace where they'd feed you a decent Thanksgiving dinner.

The Jellyfish Man feels wobbly, like he's about to lose every last drop of hooch right there on her carpet.

No thank you, says he. Put me in a home, will ya? No! And I mean no!

Way he's heard it, folks have up and died in them kind of homes. He tells her he don't intend to die before his time, which could be never.

Pop! She's practically weeping. You can't be happy the way you are.

Her pity hurts him more than if she'd stabbed him in the heart. So why don't this feel good, like other kinds of pain?

He tries to act like it was all a mistake. Be a darlin now, says he in his calmest voice, and pour your old man another drop of rye.

Takes some time for her to settle down, but of course, she does it. He is her flesh and blood, when everything's been boiled down to the basics.

Their visit ends and Maggie walks the Jellyfish Man to the





door and says Goodbye in a slow voice, like she's sad to see him go. Come visit me again, says she. I'll save you some scraps.

Maybe in a week from Tuesday, says he with a bitter laugh.

He tells himself he feels nothing at all for her. Not love, not duty, not nothin. Who needs family? Not him! He's happy as a clam all by himself. He's always finding the treasures that the Uprights drop, and like he's said a kazillion times, there's sex anytime he wants it.

I'm a man-o-war. King-o-the-sea. This life tops the first life by a mile.

Hooch has got him so relaxed he don't think twice about dumping right in front of Maggie's place. He cleaned up plenty after her, when she was a baby, after all. Her turn, now. Always will be. Last laugh's on her for letting an old fart like me live forever in the first place.

The Jellyfish Man presses the down button and feels a smile begin in his belly. He's glad the elevator goes so creaky slow because there's a wad of spearmint gum stuck to the floor that takes a little longer than usual to work free.

Man, that minty bite sure tastes fine.

Outside the building, the Jellyfish Man rolls across the sidewalk toward the curb. He zooms down the apron, which slopes into the oily street. His flippers brush a mound of gray pebbles and he wonders why it is so many shades of dark come out at night. This block is his new favorite, really rough, chock full of potholes. One of the worst in the city. Humping this street makes the trip almost worthwhile.

Uprights. They're the only ones who still complain. Only three of them on the tax rolls for every one of him. Serves 'em right, it does. They're only gettin what they deserve. Should've saved my boy when they had their chance, then maybe I'd be singin a different tune. But I ain't got no regrets, he thinks. Too late for that now.

The Jellyfish Man ignores the gurgling in his gut that turns to a throbbing pain and reaches clear from head to tail. If he can't find a way to hump it, he'll just bide his time and get the pain fixed at the VA.

A videocopper blows an electronic whistle and the transport traffic grinds to a halt long enough to let the Jellyfish Man cross the street. So what if that Upright daughter of his didn't ask him to stay for dinner? It ain't her duty to take care of him. He wouldn't have traded his freedom for her companionship, anyhow.

He remembers back forty years, when his son was hardly cold in the ground and the doctors tried to talk to him about immortality. No way was he gonna take the Man-O-Steel approach like everybody else. What kind of father did they think he was anyway, offering him perfection when his only boy was dead?

There's a broken glass bottle in the gutter. He rolls over to hump it, feeling grateful for the distraction. He humps the glass, humps it again and again. Humps it to death until he can taste himself bleeding, until he can feel the pain where the sharpies have broken through his shiny coating. When he's numb with pain he heads back toward his bridge.

Worthless Upright daughter. The Jellyfish Man turns down the alley that used to be his alley and scours the street for something good to eat. He never looks up and never looks back, why even if he wanted to, t'would be practically impossible, the way they've got him configurated. He just keeps a-rollin forward, ever forward, over the bumpy streets of the city and into the dark wet night.

Leslie What recently won the Nebula Award. Her story collection *The Sweet and Sour Tongue* is published by Wildside Books (USA). Talk to Leslie at [www.ttapress.com/message.html](http://www.ttapress.com/message.html)

## Allen Ashley the Planet Suite



Each successive astronaut has gazed back and found our magic marble a little less blue. The Moon landings offered a promise which is never likely to be delivered. Maybe the only solar system we can explore is as a concept and collection of myths, ideas and images of Venus, Mars, Mercury and so forth; to wit, the planets in our heads . . .

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**It's a sad fact of life that many of our great** modern male role models are not particularly literate. According to the Sunday tabloids, Michael Owen has only ever read one book. It's Roald Dahl's *The BFG*, in case you're interested. Why he did not progress to Willie Wonka or *The Twits* remains a mystery. Previous English football heroes such as Tony Adams and Stuart Pearce didn't complete a whole book till they were in their thirties. Shit, it must have been a long book, maybe one of those interminable Tad Williams doorstops or something . . .

Is it a class thing? Aside from the posher environs of Canary Wharf, there are no Waterstones/Books Etc shops, not even a WH Smiths, in the whole of the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. There are some decent independent bookshops but even so the place is the size of many a provincial city and is hardly short of pubs and off licences. If the booksellers believed there were the buyers locally, they'd open a branch tomorrow. The local libraries are reasonably stocked and every school spends thousands each year buying books, running home reading support schemes and generally encouraging. There's a lot wrong with the National Literacy Strategy but it's all too easy – and thoroughly wrong – to blame the education system. Is it the parents' fault, then? Are they too ready to plonk their children down in front of the goggle box to keep them quiet for an hour? Is the modern home – with TV permanently on in the background and the bustle of fraught parents and attention seeking siblings – not conducive to the contemplative state of mind necessary for absorption into the fictive world of a book? There is some truth in this but parents still read to their kids at bedtime etc. The drop-off seems to be occurring when children are able to read for themselves but don't.

It's not quite all doom and gloom regarding kids reading, although, as some of you may know, I'm a little bemused by the bizarre amount of success achieved by JK Rowling with her Harry Potter creation. Famous Five go to wizard school, if you ask me. She's hedged her bets a little by making him so hot at sports as well as studies, if you can class aerial polo ('Quidditch') as a proper sport. Certainly, she seems to have encouraged more children into reading than I'll ever be able to lay claim to. Only time will tell whether the bespectacled, heroic boffin becomes a male role model to rival David Beckham, Sisco or The Rock. Whoever/whatever he is.

In case anyone thinks I've got a downer on the working classes, I'm working class in origin myself – my dad was a tool maker and my mother an office cleaner. There has always been a stream of working class boys made good through hard work, study or talent, eg Michael Caine from meat porter to millionaire movie star. Certainly, whilst growing up, I was constantly aware of the expectations upon me to take the opportunities that had been denied my father due



to the onset of the Second World War and the subsequent need to make an early start at earning an income. In post-Thatcher service economy Britain, is the dream of social elevation no longer so valid? The only ways out of the proletariat being: sporting prowess, pop star makeover or Lottery win? Or crime, of course.

When I was younger I played football (still do), got shy around females (still do) and got into scrapes just like any other young male (try not to these days). But I usually had a Heinlein, an Asimov or an Arthur C Clarke in my satchel or my jacket pocket. Still do have something, usually a small press mag or SF Masterworks, shoved in the deepest recesses of my coat ruining the shape and the lining. Here's a tip for you, boys: a few women of my acquaintance have complimented me on the fact that I've always got a book on the go. Then again, I've never been told: "What cool trainers/an expensive gold chain/a tough Nike tattoo."

I know in the past I've been critical of aspects of young male culture. My apologies if I seem to be having a dig at the 12–21 year olds again but, well, I'd like to know when reading became totally uncool. What right do you think you've got to sit across from me on the tube taking a disdainful air just because I become engrossed in a work of fiction rather than present myself as a victim of fashion? I would recommend you allow your views and your lifestyle to be challenged by Naomi Klein's *No Logo*, but it doesn't boast topless supermodels on the cover or car ads within. And it won't tell you who's taking over from Fergie at Man U.

I've come to the simple conclusion that the main reason a lot of working class boys do not read for pleasure is peer pressure. In some areas and on many estates gang membership is nigh on compulsory. A gang reflects the personality and wishes of its leader who by definition is likely to be un-

couth and prone to outbursts of violence. Reading is for sissies, apparently. If you go into the library except to cause general mayhem and nick the petty cash, you're a wuss or worse. Evenings you're gonna hang around the empty shopping mall or loiter in the kids' playground cussing, posing, threatening passers-by or racing stolen vehicles then setting light to them. If it's pissing with rain and you stay at home, you might twiddle your thumbs on a games console, sniff some glue or something stronger, crack one off over a picture of Gail Hipgrave or Destiny's Child. But read a book? That out of date middle class nancy boy occupation? No way.

The composition and control mechanisms of modern capitalist society also play their part. Everyone is under pressure to conform and consume from birth onwards – Gap For Kids, I mean, come on! Is it any wonder that boys are so scared of not belonging, being thought of as nerds or boffins, of becoming outsiders by daring to be different?

I don't have easy answers. I wish I did. Certainly the half-hearted campaigns of successive governments and Departments for Education – such as picturing Ian Wright snuggled up with a copy of *Fever Pitch* – don't seem to have brought much improvement. I've often felt that British society lacks a codified male rite of passage to bring us entrance into the adult strata of society – a Barmitzvah, if you like. Maybe in the old days war served this purpose. Not that I'm suggesting this as a solution . . .

Maybe I should shut up and get on with life in a society where our most revered footballer can just about count to eleven but they still make him the England captain. His wife's no genius, either, nor is she particularly posh but they are GB's most admired celebrity couple. Supposedly. Or take the USA. Clinton was one big philanderer but at least he'd been to Oxford and had an aura of intelligence about him. George W strikes me as a man who can barely spell his own name. And so soon after clod-brain Reagan.

It could simply be an image problem. Perhaps we should all join together as writers and readers and get Sky or ITV Digital to throw wads of cash at us as they offer up tactical analysis of that finely placed adjective or show action replays of that satisfied smile at the end of a chapter. "There's Tim Lebbon now, he's looked up, gone 'little eyebrows' and smacked the postage stamp into the top right hand corner. Sensational." Will we mere short-storyists one day be held in the same awe-struck esteem as Roy Keane or Patrick Vieira? Will our images grace the cover of Playstation *Street Fictioneer* or Nintendo *Championship Editor*?

I'm sorry if I've been unnecessarily downbeat in this Dodo. At times I've felt like that Norwegian commentator declaiming the downfall of England: Shakespeare, Chaucer, Milton, Austen; Aldiss, Ballard, Moorcock, er, Ashley – your boys are taking one hell of a beating and no mistake.

Let's start the fightback now. Somehow.



**"I hate describing my work, especially at what my girlfriend calls 'grown up' dinner parties,"** says M John Harrison, a man who has, most likely, been asked to do so on many occasions since 1971, and the British publications of *The Committed Men* and *The Pastel City*. "I make these tentative efforts and people say, 'Oh, horror fiction then,' or, 'Oh, science fiction,' and at that point I bow out of the conversation. At one of these affairs a *Guardian* journalist asked me how I'd describe what I wrote, and when I said I didn't really know how to do that, he said he thought he could probably help me. 'You do that thing Moorcock does, but more controlled.'"

The anecdote reveals a good deal about the (unnamed) *Guardian* journalist – with his masked questions and tally-ho assumptions – but it also tells us something about one of the most consistently brilliant writers at work today: M John Harrison. His work is, as it should be, difficult to define, *sui generis*; it is unlassoable, and roams its pastures and prairies with a grin. Controlled? I understand what the journalist meant, I think – he was referring to the poise and balance of the prose – but Harrison's work leaves its mark; it is feral, it is fierce. To change the metaphor somewhat, very recently someone of my acquaintance described a piece by Harrison as being akin to necking a pint of neat scotch. It's a tidy analogy.

Harrison continues: "The problem with description anyway is that it's so close to explanation; and explaining something is so close to explaining it away. That's what he was doing: tidying me up, explaining me away. One of the points my stories make – by being there, as much as by their content – is that you not only shouldn't, but in the end you can't, explain things away.

"My stuff has changed massively across thirty years. The change is easier to describe than the work itself. You can see what's going on in *The Pastel City*. Somebody dissatisfied with fantasy of that kind is looking for a way to turn it against itself, but hasn't found a technical means. By *Viriconium Nights* he's found out how to do it, but now he sees that the problem with fantasy is fantasy itself, and it's more interesting to write about that. So he takes a thread he started in 'The Ice Monkey', which is a story about how far people will go to escape quotidian life, and he works it through *Climbers* and into *The Course of the Heart*, having to learn a whole new technical vocabulary on the way. Finally he sees that to write about people's fantasies is to write about desire, and after some testbedding in *Signs of Life*, he's looking 'Science & the Arts' in the face."

The process, however, was not quite so lean and simple. "I'm probably explaining myself away," Harrison admits. "If I could have written 'Black Houses' in 1971, I would have. That would have been a good starting point for a career. I just wasn't up to it, either as a writer or a human being. Also I was full of this pointless rage against the



f/sf genre for not being a proper vehicle for that kind of fiction. I kept stealing the bread van and complaining it wouldn't corner like a BMW. You can do that once, but twice is stupid and three times is wilful. Recognising that was the biggest change for me. At the end of the 70s I believed I'd wasted ten years. I went back to the beginning and started out again, in the direction suggested by 'The Ice Monkey'."

These days M John Harrison is continuing to reflect the status quo in his fiction. "Everything since 'Running Down'" – with its things falling apart, its decay, and the picture fascism championing at the bit – "has been designed to reflect the state of Britain," Harrison confirms. "From *In Viriconium*, through *Climbers*, to *Travel Arrangements*. But I'm less interested in the look of it now, the kind of pre-disaster landscapes I used to adore, than in the dreams that precipitate the disaster; and more interested in the place where the internal fantasies of people like Isobel, Choe and Mick (from *Signs of Life*) intersect – and are seen to become – the public dreams, the actual social and political drivers of globalism. The idea of 'choice' is what drives us to export all the risk, disorder and poverty out of the gated community of the West and into other parts of the world, so that we can enjoy shopping. We live in a fantasy culture, a culture of comfort. We must always have choice, even if someone else has to pay for it, even if it's not really real. We're so obsessed with this that it's an article of

faith with us that 'you can be anything you want to be'. This is essentially a politics of masturbation, which in stories like 'Suicide Coast' is linked to the more obvious politics of consumption, the default politics of the West. But 'Running Down' was certainly the beginning of all that. It became the template for a lot in my fiction. But you don't want to read me for this. You want to read Joel Lane or Tim Etchells. Or get out to a Forced Entertainment show, especially if they ever do *Goodbye Emmanuelle* again."

This said, Harrison has some interesting comments on the events in New York and Washington, of September 11th, a date which immediately preceded this interview. "My gut instinct," he says, "is that we ought to talk less to each other. Some people think that religion is to blame here. I think it's something prior to that. I think it's language. You can't do religion until you have language. You can't promise someone 'freedom' (Bush) or 'paradise' (bin Laden) except with words; those items are labels without a referent. And if I have to read another article by Martin Amis or Ian McEwan – middle class wankers who have never been in harm's way their whole lives, competing with one another to produce dully clever, middle-aged Britpap about real events; or if I have to hear another soundbite in which Slimy Tony, dressed up in a casual jacket to look 'hard', licks the arse of the biggest bully in the global playground by 'pledging' himself; or if I have to hear any more investment bankers presenting





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themselves as wounded martyrs in the ruins of the Church of Money; or if I have to hear another Islamic spokesman misappropriate the words 'caution' and 'evidence'; I think I might fly an aeroplane into something myself. Only so I don't have to hear words any more. Do you see? I'm fucking sick of words because I've spent nearly forty years manipulating people with them for a living, and they don't come near being the thing itself. All rhetoric, including mine, is empty rhetoric. Every death is a real one."

It comes as no real shock that Harrison chooses not to look too far ahead. "If you're going to get by, you need focus," he tells me. "I keep working to produce interesting fiction. I'm continually surprised to find myself 56 years old anyway. I work harder, perhaps as a result. The main thing is to change: life and fiction ought to work in tandem to develop you as a human being. While skill is useless unless you can bring it to new insights into your subject matter, the reverse is equally true, and in the end being able to write about things is an aid to engaging with them (that of course, is the paradox I was pointing out in answer to your question, above). I didn't understand my subject matter until recently. I was a late developer. Maybe I'll get a late flowering too." Nor does he harbour a burning desire to be judged a genius after he has died, because "It's nice to be recognised. But the benchmark is what you can do, not the tick you get for it. In terms of writing I achieved enough to be happy when

# VITAL SIGNS

## M JOHN HARRISON

### INTERVIEWED BY DAVID MATHEW

I finished *Climbers*. At the same time-I'll never be happy. Writing is a constant nuisance. It's a constant failure, not just to do what you intended, but even to understand (except after the fact) *what* you intended. I wouldn't have it any other way, but it doesn't make you good at buying things and feeling OK about your life, like someone in that bloody awful *Guardian* lifestyle magazine. Even now I'm an intense and fairly self-dissatisfied person. Most climbers will tell you the same thing about achievement: (a) the benchmark is what you can do, not the tick you get for doing it; (b) if I can do it, it can't be very hard; (c) so what's next? There's no end to that except the obvious one.

"I doubt I'll be judged as anything after I'm dead: my stuff doesn't have the human reach to live on. I think f/sf/h writers will read the short stories for a few years - more to find out *what* I was doing than how I did it." In which case, if someone had never read a word of Harrison's work, nor knew his name, what single piece would the author point that person towards, and what would he expect that person to get out of it? The answer is: "The short story 'The East', in *Travel Arrangements*. I would expect them to take away from it what they could. I would hope that they would continue to puzzle over it after they had finished reading it, think, 'Oh, that's what he meant,' go back and read it again and start puzzling over it again. I would expect them to bring their humanity to its humanity,

their experience to the experiences it claims to depict. I'd hope they got a real chill from it, a sense that something disturbing had happened to them, not just to the central character of the story: that somehow, their view of the world had been for a moment lifted up at its edge. I'd hope that in the end their dialogue with the story's central conundrums would, by wrenching their emotional reactions, extend their emotional reach."

We sense a self-deprecating air, of course: my personal belief is that Harrison is well aware of his strengths and of how much his work is admired and adored. After all, he won the Richard Evans Award a few years ago, and his fanbase is strong and loyal. On receiving the Evans, he says, he felt "Old, for a moment. At risk of being left out, though what from I wasn't quite clear. It galvanised me, to tell the truth. I decided to have more fun." Which lead in turn to the work that Harrison is now engaged in: "Something that can only be described as a space opera, though part of it is set now and in typical Harrison territory, and it will have my characteristically unforgivable approach to the material. Honestly, it's rewarding to have really committed readers. I'd hope, if I wrote a western or a historical romance, it would be as wrenched, miscegenated and decon as my assaults on the other genres. (I'm fairly certain that typical readers and writers of westerns or historical romances would be as puzzled and provoked by it as science fiction readers and writers were by *The Centauri Device*.)



I'd expect my typical reader to be looking forward to that.

"But the downside of a very loyal, long-standing readership is that sometimes they aren't happy for you to actually change. A lot of *Viriconium* readers hated *Climbers*. One described it as 'an episode of Coronation Street'. He meant it was 'only' about life as he actually recognised it. I was sad that he couldn't be as excited as I was about that. It will happen again, because – just as I'd rather make a mistake than not try new things – I'd rather alienate every last reader than not to exactly what I want. It's selfish, I know, but it's your guarantee as a reader that you're getting something intense (even if it's something you don't want). The risk here is that people will suffer lost-reader syndrome. If you change, you can't have been what they thought you were. They feel betrayed, they feel abandoned. In the murkier depths of that is a control thing: who decides who you are? You, or your colleagues and readers? I have to say that the last thing I'll accept is imprisonment in someone else's definition of who I am, or what my best work is. That can be a problem with people you knew thirty years ago."

Writing – the very process of writing – means the same to M John Harrison as it ever did: "Three parts psychological necessity, two parts job, one part a hit as good as coke or sex (but not quite as good as adrenalin). I'd rather go climbing, I might as well say that now, because trying to keep yourself together while you're looking at the wrong end of a fall is just the most absorbing thing in the world. It's to do with self-awareness, but paradoxically it doesn't leave you any self to be aware of. That was the big thing in my life: but it wasn't necessarily the healthiest or the most mature thing. What's brilliant about climbing is that you don't even have to be very good at it to bring about the basic situation. I was never more than a mediocre climber. Andy Pollitt, one of the two or three best rock-technicians in Britain at the time, once said to me, 'Think what I have to do get that scared, Mike.' I took the point."

And although some of the mechanics of composition have changed over the years – "I used to keep my journal in longhand. Now I do everything on the machine. The machine is my friend. Without the machine I would be nothing" – Harrison continues to filter his and others' life experiences onto the page. "Intentionally or not," he says, "every writer writes 'about' themselves. Once you know that, you stop trying to do it directly. That element is going to take care of itself better than you can. Given that, though, I try in limited ways to use my own experience, if only on the grounds that it's what I know. I still have this sad idea that good writing ought to be, at least partly, an attempt to come to terms with the major events of your life (and thus, by extension, other people's lives). You can do that at greater or lesser remove. 'The Ice Monkey'



is a very direct piece. Its emotional truth lies in a very direct use of real people and events. The fantasy element, though important, is reduced to two or three sentences which serve to wrench the realistic material for emphasis. On the other hand, while there's a lot of real stuff in the short story 'Empty', that realism only acts as a scaffold. The emotional truth of the story is handled in what are the most obviously fictional, fantastic elements. And the rule with *Climbers* is that just when you think it's most autobiographical it's generally least; and vice versa. I have to say that no one should take any of this as an *explanation* of what I do. I look for the wrench, the paradox, the metaphor that seems to work in more directions than it should. I look to confuse, delight and irritate. Manipulating reader-expectations around the fiction/non-fiction interface is only a part of that. It's both technique and subject matter: I write about self-anecdotalisation too."

I am interested, I tell him, in Choe (one of Harrison's most memorable characters). I can't help thinking that Choe had a very interesting journey onto the page, via an initial spark. Where did he come from?

"There are a couple of answers to this question. One is that he came from 'The Ice Monkey' via *Climbers*. He's the failure of that particular escape-trajectory: he's what you end up as when you've ramped up the body chemicals as far as they'll go and it doesn't get you high anymore.

"The other is that he's based on three or four real people, including a legendary steeplejack, a climbing journalist, and a couple of roped-access engineers. Most of his dialogue is directly reported from those sources. His driving behaviours, his favourite foods, his TV habits, the way he dresses, are direct reportage. All the anecdotal mat-

erial in Chapter Two is true (and of the same person). His 'spiritual' side is fictional and bolted on, but the key to him – which is that he's too intelligent to behave this way, and he knows it – is absolutely accurate. Guys like these undercut their own behaviour ironically the whole time, but can't learn how to do anything else. They're fantastically attractive. They're fucked. They brought attention deficit disorder to the Thatcher boom and it worked for them.

"It's twenty-two miles from Hathersage to Holmfirth, if you take a single-track back road called the Strines, which is nothing but blind hairpins in woods, with 100 and 200 foot drop-offs. Choe once spent a month trying to drive it in less than seventeen minutes in a standard Astravan. The Strines has a pub on it, and it can take a lot of traffic, so to make sure no one else was on the road he drove it after midnight. We were about three quarters along one night when it became plain he wasn't going to improve on his best time. 'Job's fucked, Mike,' he said. 'But I'll show you something, shall I?' I said yes. He stopped suddenly and screamed, 'Out! Get out Mike, and look at the van!' I got out. 'See? See?' I couldn't see anything. 'Are you fucking blind, or what? The brakes, Mike, the brakes!' They were bright red, cooling to cherry. We were ten miles from anywhere in the pitch dark and he had exported enough heat into the front discs to get them bright red. Three weeks later he was racing Jane Johnson down the same road. Jane is not a slow driver, and at that time she owned a Ford XR2. Choe was in a fifteen-year-old Datsun that had cost him a hundred quid. She held him off for eleven miles. Then he overtook her on a cattle grid and his front suspension fell off."

For M John Harrison, stories arrive at strange times and via unconventional rou-



tes. They are not necessarily in the air for him to catch? “It really does depend,” he tells me. “‘Seven Guesses of the Heart’ was based directly on a dream. More usually, a paragraph or two from my notebooks act as a seed, around which other bits and pieces fall into more and more organised relationships. You can see that clearly in ‘The Gift’. At a certain point, fictional material begins to insert itself to provide connectivity. A story emerges, the whole thing goes through a convulsion in which a lot of stuff gets thrown out. Suddenly, bang, there it is. I spend the next nine months trying to get one sentence right so I can call it ‘finished’. I begin a story anywhere along its length, including the final sentence; and I work anywhere in it, too. (The last thing I did on *Signs of Life* was to write Chapter 8.) There is a huge and welcome unconscious input: I never refuse an intuition, the more inexplicable the better. I need to be surprised by a story or it goes back in the raw material file. The ones that survive are the ones that did something extreme, of their own accord, while I was trying to write them. Stories are certainly ‘in the air for me to catch’, but I throw most of them back again, as being too ordinary or too easy to write.”

And he is pleased that reviewers are starting to get to grips with what he produces. “Recently, they have been getting things right. But they tend to get one aspect, select one theme or thread or suite of references and see that as the whole of the meaning. I can understand why, and sympathise. A lot more fish are being fried than they want to eat. Fiction traditionally processes the disorder out of life: but in something like ‘Gifco’, for instance, the whole point is to offer people almost as much depth or interpretive choice as they would have in reality. So the tendency of the reviewer is to simplify a text which otherwise would seem too unpackable, not to say wilfully incomplete and paradoxical.

“Generally, I’ve had very powerful, positive reactions, both inside and outside the genre, for the last four books. People are reading me in a way that wasn’t possible even in the 80s. Mind you, I still get some pretty dull responses.” And for a writer who seems to invest so much in each piece this really does seem like a crying shame. He might disagree with some of his interviewer’s notions – “I have to say that ‘misused magic and pricy miracles’ sounds a bit more like JK Rowling than me” he says in response to one of my questions – but Harrison thinks hard about every answer, intent on providing, in interview as in tale, the perfect prose, the ideal response. So just for the record, as it were, I asked him about his views on a series of themes. On magic:

“Magic is to do with desire. Every organism lives in the gap between the desired and the possible. Human beings, caught in the same biological anxiety as a brown rat, say: What if I had it? What if it was just on the table in front of me now? All that food,

all that money, all that fame, all that beauty? All that (fill in the blank)? What if I could change things? Do you know that utterly stunning Lou Reed song, ‘Dirty Boulevard’? I play it really loud if I forget what all this means. Magic is to guess at what you might have, and yearn for it, and then suddenly see it with a wrenching clarity, there but not there. Fiction is a medium for discussing those aspects of desire; but it’s also, and much more importantly, a way of doing acts of symbolic magic, that old Burroughsian ‘magical intervention’ in the world.

“Fantasy fiction should be an especially good means of doing that, and until the arrival of commercial fantasy, it was. It was always rhetoric, dissembled ideology, dissembled ritual, the cranky voices of real individual magicians, Catweazels who could write a bit. For me it still is. Viriconium stories aren’t just odd for the sake of it (well, not entirely). *Signs of Life* isn’t just about the misused magic of genetech, or the pricy miracle of Isobel’s transformation: it’s about the politics of transformation in our age. I’m interested in desire, whether emotional or ideological: in fact I often make reciprocating metaphors out of those two.”

On religion:

“Spirituality (along with politics, sex, art, science and probably language itself) lies in the gap between what we want and what we can have, what we know and what we don’t, between the real and the constructed, between the quotidian and the awesome, between everything it might be and the one thing it is. That gap is an unhealed cut. My stories cluster around it like rent-boys, pushers and clients in front of a King’s Cross amusement arcade, getting off on the extreme tension and equivocality and challenge welling out into the night. People need to be more than they are. Actually, I think that’s a kind of spirituality in itself, and to an extent that’s the ‘meaning’ of stories like ‘Black Houses’. But there should be some version of *caveat emptor* that warns the reader against the coldly-set traps of metaphor and self-reflexiveness. Does Choe Ashton, in ‘Anima’, meet and fuck and then deny a real earth-mother? Or is she only a Jungian figment? Or only a metaphor for his political and psychological ‘fall from grace’? All these things at once? Something else altogether? Who is being teased here (other than, obviously, the author, who is clearly teasing himself)? Most of the ambiguously spiritual incidents in my stories are designed to represent something else, even if only ambiguity itself.”

On feeling undervalued as a writer?

“I don’t. I’d like to reach a wider audience, which means by definition a larger one. But given the nature of the project – which has always been to frame questions, not provide answers – I think I’ve been well received since the mid-80s. The best two or three books attracted some serious reviews in broadsheet newspapers and literary magazines. I won a prize for non-

fiction with a novel, which is a trick if you can do it. I was a bit disappointed that *Climbers* didn’t get a nomination for the Booker, because I thought it was a good book. With hindsight I see that its human concerns were far too limited. It’s that peripherality of concern or limitation of viewpoint which has sandbagged my stuff in the mainstream and literary marketplace. I doubt there’s time to redress that now, although I’m always trying.”

And lastly, on the long-known influence of Arthur Machen.

“This is a top question,” says Harrison, “even if it is like asking me if I still beat my wife. I’m a bit chary of the uninterrogated, *a priori* definition of ‘influence’ here. On the other hand we don’t have ten years or so to have the pre-meeting meetings in which we might debate some strategies for setting the ground rules of the meetings we would have if we accepted that the term ‘influence’ actually represented the same thing to both of us. But given that, I expect I’ll always hear his voice, even though I haven’t read him for twenty years. My swerve against him and all those other ecstasies and mystic Christians was to poison his reveries with the quotidian. Thus the weird urban magic of *The Incalling* or *The Course of the Heart*.

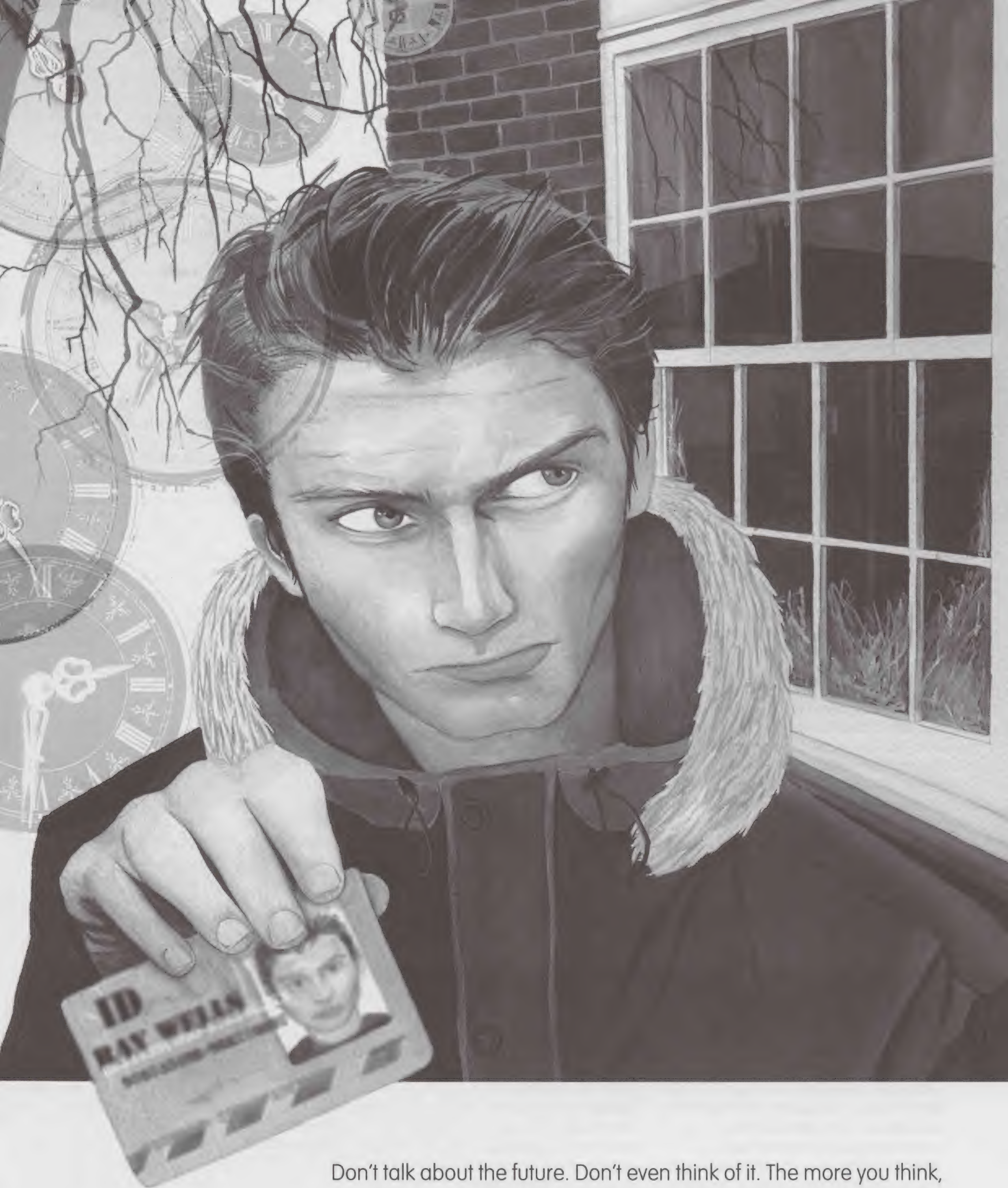
“What I’ve always tried to do with my influences is set them at one another like dogs. You can’t avoid this anyway – it’s like Jumble Wood down there, it’s bedlam, they’re all growling and yapping at once ‘and you can’t quite hear them’ – so you might as well try and use it. Two of my favourite writers when I was young were CS Lewis and William Burroughs. See? Or you might collide Christopher Isherwood with Alfie Bester. You set Rosamund Lehmann at war with the pulp sensibility of Bukowski, under the broad umbrella of Edwardian metaphysical fiction. You try to use the structures from one genre that’s ‘influenced’ you to scaffold the concerns of another. All this would happen anyway – if you’re lucky you can influence it a bit. That’s the theory, anyway. Sometimes it works, sometimes it doesn’t.

“I love Arthur Machen; but I love a lot of similar writers too, including WB Yeats, Charles Williams and the vastly underrated Robert Chambers. (Not to mention Stanley Spencer, even though he wrote with paint.) I think ‘influence’ is an old-fashioned word. These days we’re too self-aware not to be influenced. Only ageing romantics – locked in their death struggle with the strong precursor, terrified of losing their identity, racked with hypocrisy, jealous of their diminishing intellectual property – claim to be ‘original’. Another completely unexamined word.

“If your fiction is experientially based it will be true and real, whoever you co-opted as a tutor when you were young, whatever influences you swam in since.”

Visit M John Harrison’s message board at [www.ttapress.com/message.html](http://www.ttapress.com/message.html)





Don't talk about the future. Don't even think of it. The more you think, the stronger it becomes, the more it pushes back towards us, gifts us with its rubble and detritus . . . And it's not even our future in any case. We all made sure of that. Or thought we did. We thought we did . . .

# TIM LEES **THE LIFE TO COME**



The phone rang, one a.m. Hannah's voice.

"... this alien," she said.

She didn't really sound upset at first, more like the times she'd called me when her washer'd sprung a leak or she'd had trouble with her boss, something like that; controlled, and calm, and rational.

At first.

"It isn't moving much," she said. "Just sort of sitting there, just looking, You know? And it won't let me go near. I don't know what to do..."

"You tell it to get out."

"It isn't like that, John. I don't know what might happen. It's... it's, well, it's sort of scary. You know?"

"Look," I said. "You get a big stick and you poke it till it goes, alright? Simple."

"It's not like that..."

I heard her sighing on the far end of the phone. She said, "I'd really very much appreciate it if you came round. Please John."

She always used my name at times like this — times when she wanted something and I didn't want to give. Like an official, undeniable request.

"I'm going to bed. I've had a few beers, too. I don't know if I'm safe to drive."

"Please John. Get a taxi. I'll pay."

"What's it doing now?"

"I don't know. I can't see. I'm not at home. I'm in the phone box on the corner. I was worried... It was acting funny — you know?"

I told her I'd come by tomorrow, first thing. It wasn't what she wanted though. I tried to say, look, just forget it, call the cops, call someone else, call anyone. But I felt guilty. There were things between us, and I owed her favours; and it looked like this was when she called them in.

"Alright," I said. "I'll come."

She didn't comment on my tone of voice. She just had time to start to thank me, then her money ran out and the line went dead.

My clothes were in the laundry basket but I pulled them out and put them on. I wasn't bothered how I looked or smelled. I thought I'd risk the car. If I could sort it in an hour or so, or less, with luck. If I could get back home to bed...

She was waiting in the street for me. As soon as I got near, she ran into the road and flagged me down, as if she thought I'd have forgotten where she lived. She wore a baggy jumper and red jeans. Her hair had been pinned up but it was starting to come loose, stray locks hanging unevenly on one side of her face.

"Thank God," she said.

"I don't see why you couldn't have got someone else." I was grumpy now; all through the journey, I'd been brooding. "What about the neighbours?"

"They're away. Except for Rob, and he's asleep..."

"It didn't dawn on you that I might be asleep as well?"

"Oh, John," she said. "Don't be like that."

I wouldn't look at her. I just said, "Let's get it over with," and headed up the drive.

Her flat was on the ground floor: two rooms, kitchen, bathroom. I waited while she fiddled with the lock, tapping my foot. She got the door open. We went inside —

And I could *smell* the thing. It was an ugly smell, bringing to mind old grease-caked frying pans and something harsh, electric, like the smell of dodgems at the funfair, part organic, part...

She asked me, "Are you going in?"

I turned the door handle, and slowly, slowly, peered into the front room.

It was there, alright.

Big as a small man or a ten-year-old child, perhaps. I'd never seen the like of it, not even heard of such a thing. It squatted on the writing desk, its knees up to its chin and elbows jutting ominously. What might have been its head swivelled around and looked at me.

I felt the heat off Hannah's body, pressing on me from behind.

"Well?" she whispered. She was hoarse, and I could see why.

"Well," I said.

The room wasn't disturbed — not much. Some books were scattered on the floor, the TV had been shifted round at a peculiar angle, but the place hadn't been wrecked, not like you heard about sometimes.

I slipped out, pushing Hannah back behind me, and I gently shut the inner door.

She waited while I lit a cigarette. I needed one. I went into the hall and took a few drags. Then I looked round for a weapon. The best thing I could manage was the pump on Hannah's bike.

I took it off. She looked at me.

"It hasn't got a flat tyre. That's not why it's here."

"Hold this." I handed her the cigarette.

I went back in the lounge. We stared at one another then, the thing and me. It had a black, insectile carapace, and in between the joints and sutures there were moist, sticky membranes, glistening in the light of Hannah's standard lamp. I told myself it didn't look that tough. I reckoned you could crack that armour pretty easily, given a hammer, or a pickaxe, or a gun.

I held the bicycle pump up, as threateningly as I could.

And stepped into the room.

I crept around the corner of the sofa, till there was nothing between me and it except a few scant feet of carpet, and we stood there, looking at each other.

And the creature moved.

It shuffled slightly, started to emit a rapid clicking noise from some part of its body. Very gingerly, I took another step. The clicking became faster, more high pitched. It sounded like a geiger counter going mad; a swarm of angry, gravel-voiced bees.

Then the thing reared up. Black flanges opened in its casing. A kind of ruff appeared around its neck.

I backed off, faster than was really dignified.

She told me, "That's what it was doing earlier. That's when I went and called you."

The creature put its head on one side. Slowly, the noise dropped down, and died.

"It's probably just a defence display," I said. "It's probably as scared of us as we are of it."

But there'd been something specially unpleasant in it, something in the smell, and I kept thinking: venom, acid, claws, fangs — germs...

"Why don't you call the cops?" I said.

"I did. They said it wasn't urgent. They said they're busy. They said if it's still here tomorrow —"

"Bloody brilliant."

She gestured to the living room again. "John —" she begged.

I hefted up the bike pump. But no, I wasn't going back inside. I had a bad feeling, a very bad feeling, and I didn't care to test it out.

"We'll lock the door," I said. "It's not really doing much harm. We'll lock it in and sort things out tomorrow."



"I can't stay here. Not with that — "

"I'll take you back to mine. We'll phone someone tomorrow, someone who can deal with it, OK?"

I said to get her valuables. She came back with a toothbrush, credit cards, a stack of CDs: whale noises, jungle sounds, *Voice of the Tundra* . . . Jesus Christ, I thought.

"They help me to relax," she said.

"Alright, alright."

I put them in the car and we drove home.

There was activity out on the streets. Another breach, perhaps: police sirens, alarms ringing . . . An old Toyota shot a red light, barging straight in front of me. I slammed the brakes on, blared the horn in fury. I was nervous now, after my tête-a-tête with Hannah's beastie.

First thing I did when I got home was pour us both a good Bush Mills to calm us down. Then we had the usual embarrassment about the bed and who slept where, and I wound up with a blanket on the couch.

I don't think either of us got much sleep that night.

I'd heard the stories.

First it was the drugs the kids were using — weird new chemicals that suddenly appeared and swept across the culture like a wave, only to vanish without trace; then software of a kind we'd only dreamed about, a million miles from Microsoft . . .

A California UFO cult found fragments of an unknown metal at a site in the Mojave desert. Some of the pieces found their way into more reputable hands, and just for once they didn't disappear, or turn out to be shreds of some crashed truck or weather balloon. What they were exactly — even their composition — no one seemed to know. Strange lights were now a regular occurrence in the sky. Watches and clocks behaved erratically, stopping dead or running backwards at a frantic pace. Physicists across the globe reported strange anomalies in the activity of sub-atomic particles, while a temporary shifting of the spectrum in a small town outside Amiens in France rendered the reds almost invisible, revealing strange new colours in the ultraviolet range. A giant silver bridge was seen, spanning the Bering Straits, dismissed by many as an Arctic mirage, although clearly visible from space. It did not, apparently, touch either shore . . .

But things hit nearer home as well.

One morning I'd come into work, opened the filing cabinet, and found —

It was a gauntlet. Five-fingered, silver, with a faint black streak, presumably a burn, across the knuckles. Inside, it had been padded with a soft, lilac material, like silk, but probably man-made. A metal strip around the wrist made one half of a seal of some kind. This wasn't flimsy or high-fashion. This was tough, strong — a work glove, that was obvious.

I held it up, and asked if it belonged to anyone. When that failed, I asked what it was.

"An oven mit?"

"Your fancy dress?"

"A special glove for hitching in the dark . . . ?"

The jokes got feeble pretty quickly, though. We all knew what it was. It went with silver suits and fishbowl helmets and the kind of people who said 'Take me to your leader' when they turned up on your doorstep in the middles of the night. The sort of thing that only Dan Dare could look trendy in.

I was with Hannah still, back then. It was our 'trial marriage' phase, when we'd decided to attempt to live together, just to see how we got on. And if it worked, I'd quit my flat, move in with her, and . . . Well, it seemed a good idea. Just for a while.

It started out OK. We had a lot of fun, just playing house: buying some pictures for the front room, nipping down the deli for a little treat to swallow with the evening beer . . . And then, the growing tetchiness, the disappointment we both felt we'd a duty to conceal. And lots and lots and *lots* of television.

Nowadays, I wonder just how many marriages have been — well, 'saved' isn't the word — *perpetuated* by the all-embracing drone of that big box parked in the corner of the room?

Not ours, anyway.

We watched the news, the documentaries. We heard about the debris being found around the world. Because that's what it was. Not the Second Coming. Not an invasion. Rather . . . detritus. Fragments. Odds and ends.

A leak in the continuum. These little bits of rubbish from the future, dribbling back towards us, like the swill thrown off an ocean liner; all sorts of discards, broken things . . . Even the bridge that didn't reach the land. Almost, the kind of things we'd read about since we were kids. Almost, only — not quite.

I couldn't follow all the explanation. I couldn't follow it because Hannah said, loud in my ear, "That's daft. If that's the future, then it's going to be there anyway, like, in a few years. Isn't it? So we just wait and then — "

"Listen," I said.

She'd used that high, complaining tone, and even though she'd used it on the TV presenter, I still reacted like she'd used it against me.

"But if — " she started off again.

We had a row. Our second, or our third? It wasn't the decider, just another nail banged in the coffin of our married bliss, and three or four days later I packed up and went back home. I'd always had this notion of how great it ought to be, living with someone, having a partner, raising a family even. But Jesus Christ, how good it felt back in my own place! No one to interfere, no one to pester about washing up, or shopping, or forbidding me to pick my toenails (a habit which she claimed could make her physically sick to see) . . .

All that was months ago.

And here I was, driving her back.

There was a crude half-barrier blocking the street — a couple of old oil drums filled with concrete and a plank across them. I drove round.

The house looked quiet. In fact, it looked exactly as it always had, except for a peculiar misting of the downstairs window. We both sat and watched it for a few moments. Then I turned the engine off.

She said, "I can't go in."

"You live here, don't you?"

She grasped my arm. "Go and have a look first, will you? Go and have a look."

I sighed. Her hand increased its pressure. So I shook my head, resigned myself, and got out of the car.

Even from the driveway I could tell that there was something wrong. At first I thought the window had been smashed — crazed, but not yet shattered, the way car windscreens break on impact; but as I drew near, I realised there was something sticking to it, something on the inner surface — some kind of thread-like substance, covering the lower surface of the panes.

I hesitated for a moment. I felt some of Hannah's trepidation. Then, reminded she was watching, I went on.

The glass was laced, smeared with something. I picked a clear spot, cautiously approached and peered inside. The view was pretty limited. I couldn't see the creature, anyway. But now the whole room was transformed. It looked like some sort of a nest, the inside of a big cocoon. Whatever Hannah might have hoped for her possessions, this wasn't good news.



I could just make out her stereo, there on the top shelf, dribbled with what looked horribly like bird-lime, and the book shelves hung with ropes and globules of the stuff; a big, white mass where the sofa should have been . . . I moved up closer, put my eye against the glass and —

*Splat!*

I jerked back, lost my balance, tottered several steps, tripped and fell into the flower bed. I wasn't hurt; but the peep-hole I'd been staring through was covered by an oozing goblet of white goo.

So. Still in residence, it seemed. And sensitive on privacy, as well.

Somebody coughed. Not Hannah, though. A man. I turned round slowly. He was youngish, with limp, fair hair and one of those enormous, oily-coloured anoraks favoured by council workers who spend time outdoors. In one hand was a clipboard. In the other, his ID. I couldn't get my eyes to focus on it.

"Have to warn you, sir. Breach area. Entry forbidden. Your house, is it?"

"No," I said. "It's — " I nodded, just as Hannah came up.

She was fidgety. She clenched her fists, unclenched them; our official friend, biro in hand, kept asking her for details, who she was, how long she'd lived there, what she'd seen.

"Get more and more of these," he told us. "Live uns. Ugly buggers, too, a lot of 'em. 'Scuse language, miss. Advise you both, stay well away until it's sorted, that's what. We've got a team for it, like, but they're busy right now, see? Big breach, it was. Bloody big. Might be a few days yet. We had a case in — "

"Days!" she said. "But all my stuff's in there — my clothes — my books — my — "

I pulled a face. "I think it's set up home," I said.

"Oh, God — "

"I would advise," said the official, "that you find somewhere to stay the next few days. Perhaps your boyfriend here — "

"He is *not* my boyfriend!" she snapped. "And how can I stay anywhere? I haven't any clothes, I haven't even got a bloody toothbrush, and I haven't — "

"There's a crisis helpline number I can — "

But her glance soon cut him short.

She looked up at the window. Tears filled her eyes. She put a fist up to her forehead. And then she said, "It's in the front room. Not the back. It's in the front room. So I can go and pick my other stuff up, anyway."

"I really don't advise — " He tapped the clipboard. "We got rulings, miss. Besides . . . could be dangerous, you know? Should be a warning sign by rights, to warn people, and — "

"Yes," she said, "that is what warning signs do, isn't it?"

"Come on," I told him. "Just give us a minute, can't you? Be a sport."

He wanted to say no. He did. But Hannah looked at him. He hesitated. Then he said, "I've got another house to check on down the way. I'll go and have a look at that. I won't be long."

So we went in. She seemed to hesitate, uncertain what she wanted; me, I flung open the wardrobe, unhooked the hangers, bundled everything outside.

"Not that," she said. "I don't want that. That's old."

"Can't hang around." I threw the stuff out, bodily. She told me later she could picture me, directing building work along the River Kwai; it wasn't meant to be a compliment.

Something scrabbled at the front room door. A gooey substance leaked from under it and spread across the tiles.

As we were dragging the last armfuls out, the clipboard man came back. "I didn't see this," he announced. "You went inside before I got here, right?" He peered up at the front room

window, pushing back his thinning hair. "Looks like a nasty one to me. 'Bout this size, sir, you say?"

"'Bout that."

"They metamorphosise. Some of 'em do. Start off one thing, then tomorrow you got summat else, and next day . . . Very nasty when they do that, sir. Never know what's coming, that's the trouble. Then some of 'em just keel over an' die, ker-plut. Don't like the air, I'm told. Wouldn't believe some of the stuff I've seen just recently." He chuckled. "Been like bloody *Dr Who*, I'm tellin' you. I saw this one thing — nasty little bastard, pardon language, miss, sort of half machine, half — "

"Yeah," I told him. "Thanks for your help."

"Don't mention it, sir. All too happy to oblige. Got to pull together, got to — "

He was telling us the helpline number as we drove away.

Hannah was listless through the afternoon. I split the last of the Bush Mills with her, and then she phoned her Mum, and several other people, too. I tried to find a place to store her things. It wasn't easy. And did she really need the pop-up toaster? Or the radio alarm? The tubs of aloe vera, moisturisers, skin lotions and hair tonics? And why would anyone use three shampoos?

I couldn't settle either. I started looking through the bookshelves. HG Wells and all his steam-driven utopias . . . That got me thinking. Ray Bradbury, *The Illustrated Man*, a paperback so old it fell apart soon as I opened it. But I remembered all the dates inside, unlikely even when I'd read the thing, his Martian colonies and space flights in the '50s and the '60s — oh, such optimism then.

I put the book down and went back to Hannah.

"Seen that film?" I said. "*Two-double-oh-one*?"

She sat, hunched over her glass, as if to warm herself on it, as if the room were cold. "You what?" she said.

"*Two-double-oh-one*. A *Space Odyssey*. Ever seen it? When it first came out?"

"It's called *Two Thousand and One*. And course I've bloody seen it."

I sat down next to her. I took her hand. "Remember it?" I said. "The space station? BBC 12? The zero-gravity toilet? Yeah? Remember that?"

She nodded slightly.

I said, "You see it when it first came out?"

"S'pose so." She wouldn't face me properly.

"So when was that, then? '67? '68?"

"Something like that. I don't know, do I?"

"'The Ultimate Trip'. I'd say, '67, then. And the year — 2001 — the year seemed ages off, you know? Back then? And, like, it was all pretty convincing, really, wasn't it? At least, up to the freaky stuff . . . ?"

Silence.

"BBC 12?" I said. "Zero-gravity toilet? Instructions for the use of? Yes?"

"OK. So it looked real. So what?"

"So we thought that's how we'd all end up. Yeah? And I worked out I'd live long enough, I'd get a trip to the moon too, one day. That's what they used to say in comics. 'One day, you'll be able to go to the moon.' And what year is it now?"

"You know."

"Yeah. And where's the future? All of that? The wheel in space? Eh? Come on."

"Christ," she said. "It's just a fucking film for Christ sake. Jesus — "

"No. It's not a film. You think a moment. It's a year . . ."



It seems to me we missed our way somewhere. As a society, as individuals . . . We got it wrong.

The classic theory is the Freudian one, of course. That's what you'll hear discussed in pubs, that's what you'll see on cheapjack, made-for-idiots TV. We're told that we've repressed the future, and that anything repressed comes back redoubled, twice as nasty, twice as strong.

I don't believe it, personally.

Call me paranoid. But I think it's intentional. I think it's war.

The future's everything. The future's every possibility you ever thought about, or anybody thought about, just out there, waiting; it's the past that's limited, the past that's fixed, unbending, thin.

And we're the link between the two. We travel up out of the past and every second that we live, we're endlessly colliding with the future. Wiping it out. We're like a bulldozer, destroying all before us, all except that little sliver of what *really* happens, what we call the *real* world, *our* world.

And I think there are people up there, waiting to exist. Not 'real' people. Not yet. They're waiting to be born, waiting to breathe and laugh and fuck, to take their places in reality. Except reality's going a different way. We hit them and they'll wink out, buried in the Dow Jones index and the mortgage rate and Third World debt, in AIDS and cancer and the dismal little lives most of us lead. We will replace them — we will replace the *possibility* of them — forever.

I think they're trying to change our lives, to bring our history closer to theirs.

I think they're seeding us.

If they can plant us with their aliens, their worn-out space-suits and their crazy drugs, well, maybe then, against all odds, the world will change. And maybe, maybe, we'll turn into

*them*. And maybe, maybe, something like the world they know will come about, and our descendants will wear silver suits and waltz to Strauss on Saturn's moons.

Maybe.

Yet nothing so romantic's happening in my life. We've got problems over Hannah's flat, and what to do, and though she's due for compensation nobody will tell her when, or how much, or any of the other things she needs to know.

They think the creature's breeding. Laying eggs. Whatever these things do. And there's a bunch of people, MoD, who want to get a look at it. And so it's not been moved. And Hannah's been here for the last two weeks. And I'm still sleeping on the couch, developing a permanent cricked back as a result. I'm serious. I've even started walking with a stoop.

Yet this time, anyway, we've had no major rows. We tiptoe round each other like the floor's covered in glass. We make a point of saying 'please' and 'thank you', and we each ask if the other cares to watch TV, or listen to some music, or might like a cup of coffee now, perhaps?

On rare occasions when it's got to me, I've bitten back my anger in a second, forced a smile up on my face, and smoothed things over like I never could before. And she's done much the same, I know.

But that's the secret of the future. Everything's there. Whether you want it or you don't, it comes down anyway, and even marriage can come back to haunt you, twisted, fractured and turned upside down, and sometimes — here's the oddest thing — a million times improved on what it was in life.

Tim's stories have appeared regularly in TTA since we published his very first, 'The God House', in issue 12. Equally well received have been 'Starlight' (TTA20), 'Everybody's Crazy in the West' (TTA25) and 'Homeground' (TTA28). He also has a story forthcoming in *Crimewave 6: Breaking Point* (out soon from the publishers of TTA).



## The Quality of Light

### Christopher Kenworthy

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# GOING BACK

## TONY RICHARDS

**After it happened, my marriage only lasted two more months.** Janine? She would tell me, some fifty times a day, that it wasn't really my fault. But she never looked in my eyes once, each time she said it. And by mid-February, she was gone.

My drinking, already bad, went into overdrive at that point. My good job and my nice home went the same way as my marriage. Family and friends all tried their best, but ended up abandoning me. Only one thing, in the end, prevented me from going all the way down. It was that however low I seemed to sink, however much I tried to deaden the pain with alcohol, every single time I closed my eyes I could still see it, hear it. Josie stepping off the kerb into the traffic. The squeal of tyres on frozen asphalt. And a small, truncated shriek.

It was what pulled me together finally. I realised that I only had two choices. Kill myself. Or try to stop it, try to save her.

That meant going back.

Modern science was no use to me at all in that endeavour, so I turned to older belief systems, starting with the local ones first. Wikka, and then Druidism. I studied them back to front, spent time with their practitioners. Eventually discovered there was nothing for me there, and so I went to the Americas, starting in New Mexico and travelling ever south.

Mushrooms were ingested, powders sniffed, potions swallowed, smoke inhaled. I painted my face, danced and chanted. And a dozen times during that period, I did go back, grab Josie just in time, and everything would be all right again. And then, some two or three days later, I would slowly come around. Realise that only my dreams had been altered. Nothing more.

Finally, like thousands of searchers after greater truths before me, I decided to go East.

In Japan, I found him. Half an hour's slow train ride outside Kyoto, there is Nara, a most holy place, by virtue of its sacred Deer Park. It has almost as many shrines as roving, half-tame deer.

I went to the largest building first, the hulking, dim Daibutsuden. Spent almost an hour wandering around it, under the impassive gaze of the vast, shadow-clad bronze figure of Buddha which dominated the whole place. Found nothing of use there. When I emerged, I consulted my map. And discovered that there was another, equally important site some twenty minutes' walk away, across the park from here. Actually amongst the woods. The Kasuga Taisha Shrine.

Right there in the trees. And animism, connection with nature — I had already concluded — was pretty important, if I was ever going to find my way back. I could only travel backwards to the point where I saved Josie if the world allowed me to. It was a matter of . . . receiving its permission.

It was well gone midday by this time. It had rained heavily all the previous night, and the sky was still so filled with black pendulous cloud that I moved through an early twilight. I was alone as I walked across the open grassland to the trees. The few tourists who'd arrived today were still clustered around the temples. As I went in through the branches, down the narrow track, the light became still dimmer until I could barely see ahead of me at all. Until I reached the shrine.

The place was especially wondrous in semi-darkness. There amongst the wood were ranked thousands of stone and metal lanterns. Only a few of them were lit, so that the rest looked only half-real. There was silence all around me, save for the occasional drip of water from the tall, rain-sodden trees. I could have stayed there until true night fell, so wrapped up was I in it all.



When the priest stepped out from nowhere, I ought to have been startled. But he did it in so gentle and so delicate a way that I was not alarmed at all. He seemed to be tall and thin, though I could not be quite certain of that. He was dressed from head to toe in dark grey robes, so that his frame was barely visible at all; his face seemed to float quite unsupported in the dimness. A young face, the scalp clean-shaven. Eyebrows gone, and high cheekbones, and lips so full and curved that I could almost have been looking at a girl. He gazed at me for a few seconds, expression impassive, only his eyes smiling at the sight of me. And then he beckoned me to follow him.

I had done stranger things than this by far, the last few years. And so I followed without question.

Further back in the woods was a small stone hut, the door lit by a single candle. This he disappeared inside, to re-emerge from seconds later with something clasped in his fist. He didn't show me what it was, at first. Just stared at me again, as though waiting.

And I don't know what did it, but it all came pouring out.

*Out shopping with Josie . . . just before Christmas . . . frost on the paving stones, breath misting on the air . . . she just four years old, so excited . . . and I kept hold of her hand the whole time, yes I did, I promise I did, except . . . except . . . the old woman passing by us, losing her footing on a patch of ice . . . and I reaching across to steady her out of pure instinct . . .*

"I only let go of Josie's hand for a few seconds!" I was now crying out loud, amongst the darkened trees. "A few seconds, oh God, I swear it!"

The priest, his eyes still smiling, reached out with the index finger of his free hand. Let one of my tears drip onto it. Then clasped that in his palm as well, as though it were some gem.

He showed me what he had fetched from the hut.

It was no bigger than an old penny. A tiny disc of metal, of a greenish hue. And ranked around its outer rim were twelve evenly-spaced Japanese characters. Like a clock, but with no mechanism and no hands.

He gave it to me.

"You must return to where it happened, the exact same place," he told me.

His lips were not moving in any kind of rhythm to the words that I was listening to. Was he speaking in his own tongue, and I hearing in mine?

"You must hold this in both hands, and think about what happened. And then, you can go back. You can put it right."

"But," he warned me, with a sympathetic sternness, "there will be a price."

Really? And could it be any worse than the prices I'd already paid? I nodded my thanks to him, and then started back for England.

It was even the precise same date. Four years to the day since Josie had run off into the traffic. I waited till gone midnight, when the high street would be empty. Then I returned to the exact spot.

Four years since I'd been here, but it was easy to find.

I clasped the little disc between my palms, in a prayer attitude. And closed my eyes. And remembered the squeal of tyres, the brief shriek. They were still there, fresh as ever in my skull.

And when I opened my eyes, it was daylight, the street around me was full of people. There was the old lady, slipping on the patch of ice.

Someone else reached out to catch her anyway.

I swung sharply to my right. And there she was.

A frozen moment . . .

In which, I could even see what she had been running towards. Over on the far side of the street, a woman was walking, on a pair of tartan leashes, a brace of West Highland terrier pups, so young that they looked no more than animated balls of fluff. And Josie had loved puppies — I had promised her one when she was old enough to look after it, such a hollow promise now.

Her whole tiny body was straining towards the little pups, both of her arms outstretched.

One of her feet had already left the kerb.

The frozen moment passed. I lunged forwards. And grabbed her by the fleece-lined hood of her smart winter coat. And dragged her back.

I'd done it. So I hugged her. But she simply struggled in my arms, let out a troubled whimper.

That was when a hand descended on my shoulder, from behind.

"Christ almighty, thank you," said a voice.

And my insides seemed to tighten. Because that voice — it seemed rather too familiar.

"I only let go of her for a moment," the man behind me was now saying. "I don't know what I was thinking of." Then he reached down, and scooped Josie out of my helpless grasp.

Slowly, I straightened. Turned around, so slowly. Looked at him.

This wasn't what I had envisaged, all this time I'd dreamt of going back. I had meant to return to the same place and same time, the way I'd been. And put everything right. And go on with my life the way it had supposed to be.

Instead of which . . . ?

I was looking at Me.

And the strangest thing of all was that, he didn't even seem to recognise me.

Strangest thing. Until I caught sight of my own reflection just behind him, in the glaze of a shop window.

I and Me? Just four years apart, we were completely different. He, clean cut and clean-shaven, conventionally dressed, sporty-looking, with his skin pale from the drizzly English weather.

And myself? I had a beard now, and my hair grew down across my shoulders. My skin was baked brown from years spent in far warmer climes, and my clothing was a rag-bag collection from half across the world.

And yet . . . it wasn't even that that truly separated us.

I looked at his face and his eyes, unaltered by experience, untouched by hardship, tragedy.

Then I stared, very hard, at the reflected sight of mine.

We might as well have come from different planets.

He was looking at me strangely now, as though suspecting that there might be something wrong with me, wrong in the head. But then his politeness took over, and he thanked me once again. He even wished me Merry Christmas before going on his way.

I watched me bobbing off along the high street, with my daughter clasped tight in my arms. Watched me heading back towards my nice home and my loving wife. My good job and my promising, unblemished future.

One that I would never know.

At least I'd saved her. There was consolation, plenty of it, just in that.

I waited till I'd disappeared completely, before going on my way.

Tony is the author of two published novels, *The Harvest Bride* and *Night Feast*, and has had stories appear in numerous magazines and anthologies. He's currently a full-time freelance, living in London with his wife.



# Electric Darkness



Talk to Christopher Fowler at  
[www.ttapress.com/message.html](http://www.ttapress.com/message.html)

**All films are partly about geography.** American movies often have a wonderful sense of location. Theirs is a lateral society, an open, sprawling, outdoor canvas upon which to paint colourful, exciting moving pictures. British films, by comparison, tend to reflect an indoor sensibility. Where Americans ride and drive and wave and shout and fire guns at the sky, we sit and discuss and apologise and cup our cigarettes inside our hands so as not to annoy the person next to us. This private indoor distinction, our careful attention to space and dialogue, is the most noticeable trait of our films. After the war, Hollywood was sending John Wayne across the Nevada horizon while we were busy transcribing the delicate slights of *The Importance of Being Ernest* to celluloid. Only a handful of our films have any sense of landscape, and those that do have but a fragmentary connection with our past, which, in a country with an urban society more than two thousand years old, is a little peculiar.

Probably no film has a greater sense of psychic geography than Powell and Pressburger's *A Canterbury Tale*, which avoids conventional categorisation with such casual defiance that the iMDB finds it impossible to identify the film's genre, and you end up wondering why more tales haven't been told in this manner. The plot is deceptive; during wartime Britain, a land-girl and two soldiers set out to discover the identity of 'The Glue Man', a bizarre night attacker who pours gum into the hair of girls seen with soldiers. The mystery is obliquely

Wonderland

solved and the villain, a likeable decent man, goes unpunished, because this is not what the film is really about. It's a meditation on the land, its people, the loss of old ways and the birth of the new, set on the Pilgrims' Way and in the area around Canterbury Cathedral. It suggests continuity with a Chaucerian past, but also shows how the present time is coming to an end.

For a film so opaquely constructed, there are scenes of astonishing power, of clouds and fields and pastoral lives, and finally a lengthy sequence in the cathedral itself, where Bach's 'Tocata and Fugue' and Sullivan's 'Onward Christian Soldiers' reveal a country uneasily at war, but at peace with itself. There are shades of novelist Alan Garner's style in a scene where a girl hears pilgrims' horse bells sounding in the present.

The history of British film is one of elaborate sets, not location work. There are some practical reasons for this; our notoriously unreliable weather, of course, and for many years it was impossible to get permission to film in specific locations. But the city remains under-used, or worse, spectacularly misrepresented.

*Blow Up* was filmed in Charlton's Marion-Wilson Park, an odd, hilly landscape chosen for its sightlines that Antonioni exaggerated with specially constructed buildings. The effect is one of dislocation, alienation, and a powerful sense of unease, if not narrative cohesion. John Schlesinger used Greenwich for *Sunday Bloody Sunday*, an area also used by Ken Russell to stand in for Imperial Russia in *The Music Lovers*. Russell deserves some kind of award for the sheer perversity of his location choices, choosing the Regent's Canal for Tchaikovsky drowning attempt.

Recently, the mediocre gangster film *Essex Boys* benefitted enormously from its estuary setting, and even Michael Winterbottom's chilly, unlikeable *Wonderland* at least showcased a night-time London all too rarely seen on film. What these British films tend to do, though, is consciously attempt to show us a snapshot of the times. So *Trainspotting* captures a certain kind of Scottish sensibility at a very specific period in its history, just as *East is East* catches Salford in a time of awkward growing pains. One film with a surprisingly powerful sense of place is *Witchfinder General*, set in Laven-





ham, and various Norfolk and Suffolk towns. It is filled with the kind of country soundscape one can no longer hear. Many scenes take place at dawn or dusk. Meadows rustle beneath darkening skies, where people, to quote a character in the film, 'may not be who they appear to be'. One senses the unnerving uncertainty and a lack of trust sweeping a country in the throes of civil war. Beyond its standard revenge plot, it is a film that allows for silences, and contain scenes that leave room to the land to reveal itself.

For David Lean, location was often an integral part of each film, whether the surroundings were the Hogarthian slums of the city or the tea-drinking London suburbs of Noel Coward, and one can't imagine *Brief Encounter* without its Lancashire railway station. It must be said that even lowly Carry On films often gave one a sense of being in real London areas (usually Middlesex), because they could rarely afford decent sets.

Peter Walker rooted his horror films in specific areas of the city in order to save money, but incidentally caught the strangeness of the urban landscape. In *Frightmare*, for example, Andrew Sachs walks across a deserted Battersea Fairground on the way to his death, characters arrange an uneasy meeting on Shepherd's Bush Green, and a gradual accretion of co-ordinates accurately locates the film's murderous activities in a specific area.

Polanski's *Repulsion* seems to dig beneath the surface elegance of Knightbridge to expose the corruption lurking beneath – and of course it's always fascinating to see sixties' London boasting a cohesive, integrated attitude to street design. Many films of the sixties like *Darling*, *Smashing Time* and *Morgan – A Suitable Case For Treatment* provide virtual catalogues of swinging British fashion and architecture.

Meanwhile, Mike Leigh often chooses to look behind the landmarks at the city we really see, the ugly backstreets, the dead spaces beneath motorways, the unintentionally comedy of the suburbs. In this approach, he is diametrically opposite the view of England proposed by Walt Disney.

To be fair, Disney's animators went to the trouble of carefully photographing Primrose Hill for sequences in the original *101 Dalmatians*, but for the live-action remakes Disney produced one of those warped geographies of London that link Big Ben and Trafalgar Square to Burlington Arcade. American children have always been presented with an absurdly anachronistic view of London involving jolly coppers, beefeaters and cockerney knees-ups, but when we photograph our own landscape, we are drawn to darker corners. Leigh used the dingy alleyways of King's Cross for his comedy *High Hopes* while Sheffield was home to *The*



*Full Monty*, Liverpool housed *Letter to Brezhnev* and the strangeness of Fen Country was captured in *Waterland*. The real London is a wonderful but underused location, and we rarely see its most interesting areas on film. Cornwall shares a remarkable visual affinity with the West coast of America, but few films have been shot there (*Blue Juice* and the still banned *Straw Dogs*). This may be because the elements which shaped each area are changing, or have gone forever.

As the hoplands and mills of Kent disappeared, so did the reason for using Kent as a specific location. Kent turned up in virtually every Children's Film Foundation film I ever saw at the Saturday morning pictures, and I remember thinking how old-fashioned they were at the age of ten. As accents become ironed-out and the superstores ensure that homogeneity replaces local eccentricity, there seems little point in locating films within particular areas. Communities exist as much in the mind now as they do in specific places. And yet, certain films continue to utilise locations to create atmosphere. *Jeepers Creepers* uses its backwoods bible-belt landscape to unsettling effect, while the unusual setting of Chicago's blue-collar neighbourhood in *Stir of Echoes* lifted an average film into a higher league.

With so few British features managing to secure a theatrical release (or a release of any kind – the all-star cast *Revengers' Comedies* remains missing to this day) it might be time for film-makers to remember that where they set their film is just as important as who they cast it with.

*Stir of Echoes*

Christopher Fowler





## THE CABINET OF DREAMS

**Mark Beech** on the dark, grotesque, haunting and mesmerical films of The Brothers Quay

In this rare appearance before the cameras, providing the introduction to their latest short film, *In Absentia*, you could almost be forgiven for mistaking the twin Brothers Quay for escapees from the dreamish clutter of one of their own fairytale worlds. They stand at awkward angles from one another, like a reflection seen twice in the half-open lid of a jewelry box, their eyes flickering thoughtfully as they speak of their collaboration with Karlheinz Stockhausen, who provides the film's score; finishing each other's sentences in their lapsed American accents.

"Neither of us," they say, "anticipated the aggressiveness of the music and its power . . . what we heard were these fantastic moments of intense anguish followed by this derision – laughter . . . suggesting a sort of psychic landscape."

Commissioned as part of the Barbican's Festival of Experimental Film and Music 2001, expectations were high for *In Absentia*. Six years had passed since their last film, *Institute Benjamenta*, during which time their output had consisted entirely of set design work on Broadway, and for the English National Opera, as well as numerous book covers, and music videos for Michael Penn and 16 Horsepower.

As *In Absentia* opens, and its first pulses of lightning run around the abrasive electrics of its soundtrack, illuminating a mangled landscape, we know at once that we are in familiar Quay territory. This realisation brings little comfort.

The film's only (human) character, identified simply as E.H., lived, we are told, and wrote to her husband from an asylum. She is every Quay lady protagonist in her Victorian gown and tightly laced boots: the mad twin sister of Lisa Benjamenta perhaps, or another aspect of *The Comb's* sleeping beauty. We see her, for most of the time from behind, hunched over her desk, pencil gripped between tensely twitching fingertips, poring over the indecipherable scribble of her handwriting. Semi-human voices and shrill laughter cut through the white noise of her inner turmoil. Lights and shadows hurtle about her. Broken pencil nibs stand up on their ends at her feet, and reel, like iron filings on a magnet, while a threadbare stag-creature is seen patrolling the gloom.

Part live action, part puppet animation (sometimes indistinguishable as either), *In Absentia* is a relentless, exhausting film to watch (and listen to), but one that is impossible to look away from. While it may lack the narrative complexity of their best work, technically it is faultless, classic Quay, born out of that same dark, dangerous crawl space where the moldering deadwood of ennui and routine feed the fires of tyranny, sexual paranoia and madness.

The Quays – Timothy and Stephen – were born in 1947, in Pennsylvania, USA. They studied illustration together at the Philadelphia College of Art, before moving to London to enroll at the RCA. Here, they found themselves increasingly drawn towards an oblique sort of middle European aesthetic, suggested in the graphic and operatic German traditions, and in the works of literary outsiders like Robert Walser and Bruno Schulz. Franz Kafka's fragmentary diaries became their bible. The folk-inspired music of Bela Bartok, Leos Janacek and Jean Sibelius provided their soundtrack. Striving to more fully explore the possibilities of



narrative and sound in their art, they began to experiment with animation and, more essentially, puppet films, a tradition held in great respect throughout Central and Eastern Europe.

After graduation, and a short, unsatisfying spell designing book covers in Holland, they were persuaded by fellow graduate Keith Griffiths to submit an idea to the British Film Institute, and as a result, were awarded funding for what would be their first, post-RCA puppet animation, *Nocturna Artificialia*, completed in 1979.

At a time when serious adult animation was practically unheard of in this country, *Nocturna Artificialia* was hardly ever likely to bring the Quays recognition outside the environs of the art-cinema hardcore. But by even the Quays' standards, it is a dark and challenging film; part David Lynch, many parts Samuel Beckett.

Filmed in high-contrast black and white, it details a kind of somnambulist journey of self-discovery embarked upon by a consumptive-looking man/puppet, through the disintegrating walls of his room and into a city beyond. Each of its eight captioned chapters take him deeper into an understanding of his sodium-lit world, with its startling angles, twisted shadows and phantom trams. In the end though, awake again and back in his room, it is impossible to know whether his quest has been a success, or if it has, just what its new knowledge will afford him.

Many of the themes and visual ideas in *Nocturna Artificialia* would be more deftly and satisfyingly explored in the Quays' later films. It remains though a tremendously portentous debut.

The importance of Keith Griffiths's ongoing belief in the brothers – and in experimental cinema as a whole – cannot be overstated. In 1980, he founded Koninck Studios with the Quays which as well as being responsible for all their subsequent projects, would also go on to provide funding for Patrick Keiller's *London* and Jan Svankmajer's *Conspirator of Pleasure*.

In its early days though, the company was reliant on Griffiths channeling in funds from his television work. The Quays' output at this time is scattered with uncompleted projects, fragments and curiosities. They made intriguing documentaries on Punch and Judy, Stravinsky and Janacek. (They also found time for a brief, rarely spoken-about 'acting' appearance in Peter Greenaway's first feature, *The Falls*.)

In 1984, however, they received what must have been a dream commission when they were asked to produce a series of nine animated vignettes to act as illustrative interludes in a television documentary on Jan Svankmajer. These short shorts, compiled and viewed in isolation as the 14-minute *Cabinet of Jan Svankmajer* seem like chapters from some metaphysical biography. Jan Svankmajer himself appears in the form of a puppet based on Arcimboldo's Librarian: a man made entirely of books. He is our teacher and guide through a bewildering realm of dissecting tables, unfolding maps and drawers that open into smaller and smaller drawers. A little Victorian doll, his protegee or a younger version of himself perhaps, has its head first emptied of all its dross, and then refilled with a master's surrealist wisdom. As a single short film, it is fairly unsatisfactory, but its importance should not be overlooked.

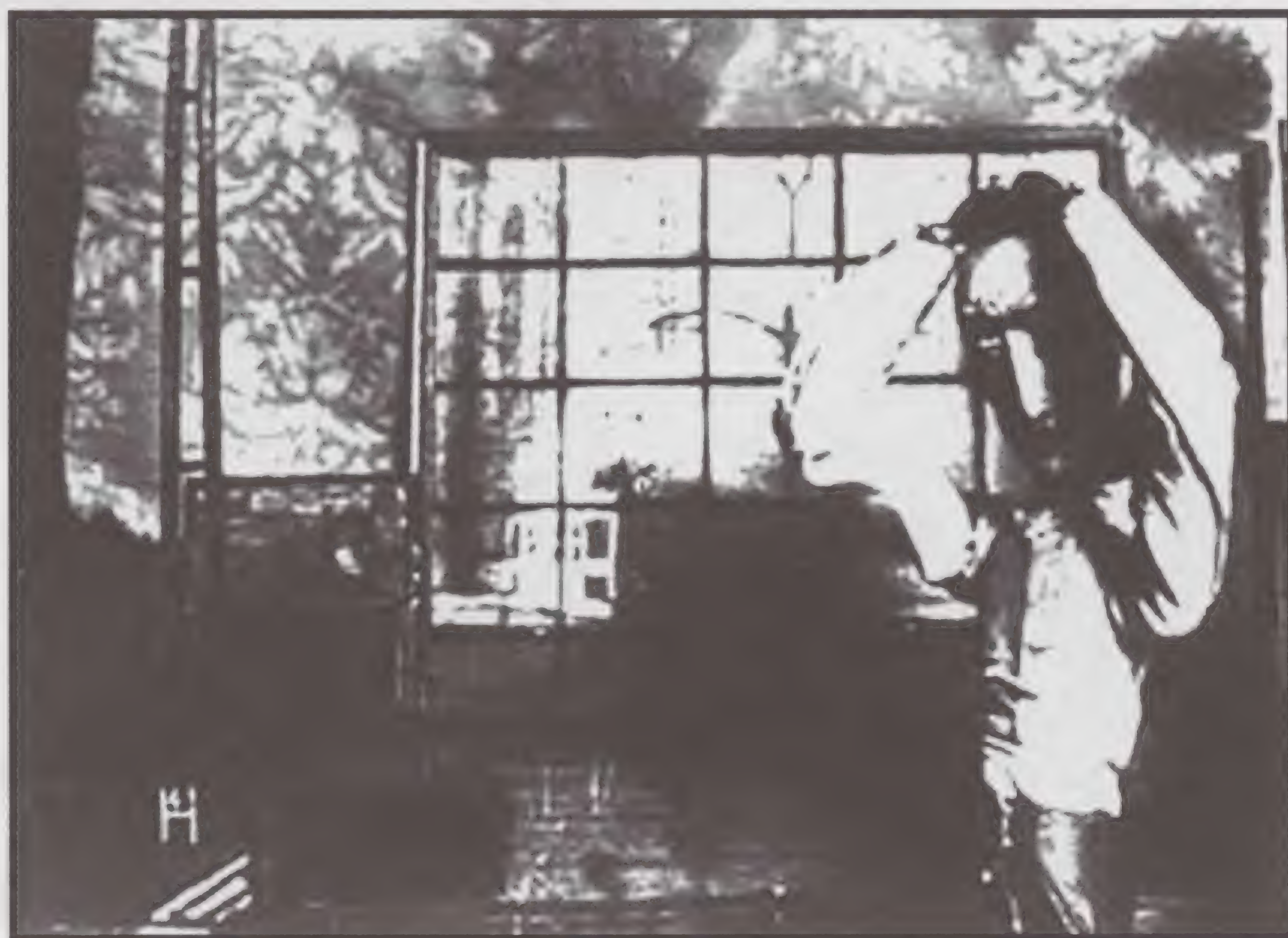
At that time, Jan Svankmajer was almost unheard of this side of the iron curtain, though the Quays were long-term devotees. In helping raise his profile, they were also defining a point of reference by which their own work might find an audience. It is notable therefore that in the UK and US, both parties found popularity at more or less the same time, though with Svankmajer having already notched up an impressive back-catalogue, the Quays had the more difficult job of convincing everybody they were not simply wannabe imitators. Certainly, on a purely aesthetic level, their films show similarities, with their use of animated toys and dolls, found-object clutter and a preoccupation with decay. But their intentions are very different. Svankmajer is a surrealist: the objects within his films are random and leached of their intended purpose. The Quays are symbolists: their clutter is meticulously placed and filled with original meaning. It's hard to say whether the Quays' films would have looked significantly different, had Svankmajer never existed. They continue to be unfairly compared.

Still striving to define themselves, in 1985 the Quays made what was intended as the pilot for a series that never materialised due to lack of funding. This curious project marks perhaps the last of their wayward beginnings, the impossibly titled '*This Unnameable Little Broom*', or '*Little Songs of the Chief Officer of the Hunar Louse*' (Being a Largely Disguised Reduction of the Epic of Gilgamesh) *Tableau II*. In it, Gilgamesh is depicted as a stunted, childlike, Picassoesque harlequin on a tricycle, wheeling dementedly about a shadowy stage rigged out with lethal tripwires and mechanical traps. He sets about ensnaring Enkidu, the wild man of the forest, with anatomical drawings and a vulva made from a piece of raw meat. As the birdlike Enkidu engages, he is immediately catapulted into a cats-cradle of overhead wires, whereupon Gilgamesh captures him and cuts off his wings with a rusty pair of scissors.

This is a truly grotesque small film. One can only wonder where the Quays had intended their series to go, and whether anyone would have been any the wiser by the end.

Seven years after the unfocused promise of *Nocturna Artificialia*, the Quays had yet to produce

*Nocturna Artificialia*







**Institute Benjamenta**

anything like a single definitive work, or to prove themselves worthy of their oft-alluded to inspirations. Their next film, *Street of Crocodiles*, would change all that.

Completed in 1986, it is probably their most perfect film. It is based on a bizarre metropolitan fable by Polish writer Bruno Schulz, and tells of an uncharted city district, a white space on a street map, onto which the narrator projects a glorious fantasy of moral decadence and an escape from the humdrum.

In its live-action prelude, captioned 'The Wooden Esophagus', the janitor of a deserted museum uses a street map to configure the apparatus of an old viewing Kinetoscope, and by lubricating its decrepit mechanics with his spit watches through the eyepiece as the Streets of Crocodiles creaks alive in its dusty depths.

Through filthy shop-windows, half-machine people can be seen at their workbenches. Rusty screws twist up from the gutters, and move through the grime like worms. An antique pocket-watch in a shop display falls open to reveal workings made of raw meat.

The film's protagonist, a startled-looking fellow in high collars, moves cautiously through the district, following the tangle of filaments from which the janitor's actions have freed him. They take him at last to what we suppose to be a tailor's shop, presided over by a band of hollow-eyed, androgynous doll-things, which immediately set about fitting him with a new body. Their provo-

cations lead the explorer to believe that he has indeed discovered the black heart of that perverted district, but when he is taken into the back of their shop, all that awaits him are a few mouldering, sexually ambiguous wall-hangings.

*Street of Crocodiles* is a concession to modernity and amorality, but in the end only a shadow-play, where none of its promises can ever be fully realised.

Bruno Schulz was murdered by the Gestapo in 1942, and critics have been quick to pick up on certain of the images the Quays use in their film as references to the Nazi holocaust. The tailor's shop dolls – symbols of apparent degradation – all display serial numbers on the backs of their heads, like the tattoos of the victims of concentration camps. In one sequence, a slab of bloody meat is laid out over a map of Poland. But just as nobody could ever be accused of reading too much into a Quay film, the sheer relentlessness of their imagery allows no time at all for heavy-handedness.

Technically the film is fearless, employing every trick the Quays had learned. The camera glides in and between the animated figures with ease and smoothness. Objects fall endlessly in and out of focus, giving an incredible sense of space.

It also marks their first collaboration with Polish musician and composer Lech Jankowski, who they had met some years earlier at a theatre festival, and in whom they had found a kindred spirit. He would go on to provide the music for almost all their films, the ghostly lullabies and discordant minuets that are now as much a part of the Quays oeuvre as anything appearing on-screen. Their working relationship is typically unorthodox, a process of reciprocal creative provocation. Jankowski tapes his soundtracks with only a rough outline of what the film is about, often before anything has actually been filmed. The Quays then allow his music to suggest the direction the story should take; in their own words: "We have always preferred that a film's structure obey musical laws rather than only dramaturgical ones." It's difficult to think of any other filmmakers for whom sound and music is so utterly infused into their work.

In the same year as *Street of Crocodiles*, the Quays won further recognition for their contributions of dancing fruit and chickens to Peter Gabriel's acclaimed 'Sledgehammer' music video. But for anyone expecting this sudden praise to have mellowed the brothers in any way, their next film would provide quite a shock.

*Rehearsals for Extinct Anatomies*, completed in 1987 and based on a print by Fragonard, is the Quays' most complex and discomforting animation. With its opening caption we are told: 'These decors have been engraved with great modesty and dedicated to London Underground as part of its present evangelical rampage'. As the camera pulls focus to the creaks of over-taut piano wire, the screen is filled by a hideously corroded doll's face with a single, vibrating eyeball. The atmosphere pulses and buzzes about it. A cancerous outgrowth on its forehead sprouts a single hair. The captions continue: 'And to the anonymous anatomical specimen – to the single still dreaming hair on his brow with its desire to disturb the wallpaper'. Revealed in all its grotesquerie, the doll has only a mess of mangled wires where its



body should be. It rubs furiously at the growth. The wallpaper in question is a vast barcode, covering the walls. Disembodied hands scratch at its lines with styluses, as if it were a musical instrument. When, at last, the doll plucks out its single dreaming hair, the atmosphere is instantly broken. The lines of the barcode melt down the walls, and the film opens up. In a different cell, a character sits on a sickbed vigil for his lover. In another, a ball is bouncing up and down a marble staircase. The camera swings listlessly between these places, creating a sense of universal ennui. Finally, we find ourselves back with the malformed doll, which is again rubbing at the growth, where a hair is already growing back. As the shot fades, we have time to glimpse the colour seeping back into the wallpaper behind him.

*Rehearsals for Extinct Anatomies* creates an unsettling picture of unsatiable desires and crippling ennui in a world of uniformity. It is not an easy film to watch, or to forget.

Throughout the second half of the 80s, the Quays' work reached a wider audience as a result of Channel 4's unprecedented commitment to supporting British animation. This was a vibrant time for the industry, out of which the likes of Joanna Quinn, Nick Park and Candy Guard all established their reputations. Advertisers were, as ever, falling over themselves to tap into this new creative vein, often simply having the original films remade to fit their concerns (as with Nick Park's *Creature Comfort* ads for British Gas). In turn, the money these small compromises brought them provided greater freedom for them to pursue more personal projects.

The Brothers Quay posed a trickier problem than most for the ad men. The films they were making offered none of the British coziness of most of their contemporaries, and were far too dark for the mainstream: a whole decade would have to pass before their influence had filtered down, via MTV and a few low-grade horror movies, into seemingly every fake surrealist beer commercial on TV. What resulted from the Quays' commercial work in the 80s, selling, amongst other things, KP Skips, ICI Woodcare, Coca Cola and Nikon Cameras, was occasionally inspired, but watered down; unquestionably functional. This was perhaps their own 'concessions to modernity', their own Street of Crocodiles.

Yet it was as a result of this work, and as a possible response to any concerns of their films being cheapened by it, that their wittiest and freest body of work emerged: the *Stille Nacht* series. These four shorts, none of which are over four minutes in length, were made between 1988 and 1993. Linked tentatively by – as they put it – “the belief in oblique salesmanship” they were acknowledgements of the unavoidable commercialism inherent in commissioned work. So just what are they selling? *Dramolet: Stille Nacht I* (1988) was commissioned as a one-minute Art Break by MTV off the back of *Rehearsals for Extinct Anatomies*. In it, a doll observes his world being consumed by dancing iron filings. It's slight, but unmistakable. *Are We Still Married?: Stille Nacht II* (1991) and *Can't Go Wrong Without You: Stille Nacht IV* (1993) are altogether more satisfying pieces. They are essentially music videos for American avant-folkists His Name Is Alive, and follow the curious

adventures of a faceless little Alice on a weighing machine, a fluffy white toy rabbit in pursuit of a ping-pong ball, and a death-headed egg-collector on a dusty old landing. They are wonderfully detailed, beautifully packaged little comedies of the absurd, funny but never frivolous. Between these two segments the gentle, haunting *Tales From the Vienna Woods: Stille Nacht II* (1992) is neatly sandwiched. They have done away with any sort of protagonist for this one (though a doll's hand slips into shot now and again), and we are forced to make our own way through this deer-park of animalistic furniture and shadowy pine-branches, to the muffled strains of a fairytale string quartet and the fatherly tones of a Viennese storyteller.

Nothing is actually for sale then (the His Name Is Alive tracks were never singles), and no obvious compromises have been made. The Quays are having a joke perhaps, or putting any fears of 'selling out' to rest. In any event, the spell has been broken and our barcoded wallpaper seeps clear once more!

The beginning of the 90s saw the release of two very different, but equally significant short films: *The Comb (From the Museums of Sleep)*, and *De Artifialia Perspectiva or Anamorphosis*.

With *The Comb*, the Quays display to us their fairytale world at its most sumptuous and intoxicating. The opening credits proclaim the film to be based on the work of Swiss writer and drifter Robert Walser, though their approach to the text is typically oblique. In the opening live-action shots, a shimmering silvery morning light takes us into the bedchamber of a sleeping beauty. She tosses restlessly, dreaming. A voice echoes out, the gruff, rasping sneer of an ogre king: “I own the castle, the woods, the mountains, the air, the cloud, the sky!” The scene has already changed. Are we dreaming? The caption reads ‘At the edge of this forest . . . around autumn time’. The world is bathed in a gorgeous golden glow. Amongst the tangle of the trees a decrepit doll is holding a ladder, and as we are told “Suddenly the air grew hard” he is embarked upon an unspecified quest, a Prince Charming of sorts. His ladders take him out of the woods, and through a series of twisted attic spaces and trapdoors clogged with brambles and tree-roots. The taunts and bellows

**The Comb**





1979 **Nocturna Artificialia**  
 1980 **The Falls**  
     acting in Peter Greenaway film  
 1980 **Punch & Judy**  
 1981 **Ein Brundermord**  
 1981 **The Eternal Day of Michel De Gheledeode**  
 1982 **Igor – The Paris Years Chez Pleyel**  
 1983 **Leos Janacek: Intimate Excursions**  
 1984 **The Cabinet of Jan Svankmajer**  
 1985 **This Unnamable Little Broom**  
     aka **The Epic of Gilgamesh**  
 1986 **Street of Crocodiles**  
 1986 **Sledgehammer**  
     contributions to Peter Gabriel video  
 1987 **Rehearsals for Extinct Anatomies**  
 1988 **Dramolet (Stille Nacht I)**  
 1989 **The Pond/Ex Voto**  
 1991 **The Comb (From the Museums of Sleep)**

of the ogre king echo about him. It's difficult to be sure whether ultimately his quest has been worthwhile. He takes, perhaps, a trapdoor too far, and finds his ladder pushed away from under him. But the sleeping beauty has awoken, her dreams leaving a curious aftertaste. A smile forms on her lips. "I own the castle!" she whispers.

*The Comb* is filled with expressionistic trickery and curious perspectives. The use of light and colour is astonishing, and for many critics proved the Quays as amongst the most competent technicians working in film today.

*De Artificialia Perspectiva or Anamorphosis* is, on the face of it, an educational film; an animated lecture in collaboration with art historian Roger Cardinal. The Quays' dolls guide us through the history of the method by which painters in the 16th and 17th Centuries would mischievously hide within their work ambiguities and second meanings only visible when the paintings were viewed from a specific angle. While the Quays' love of visual trickery may have found an expression in this film, it would be as easy to see in anamorphosis a design for their own eschewed approach to narrative. It's all a question of finding a different perspective!

For their next major project and their most ambitious to date, they would turn again for inspiration to Robert Walser. In 1908, the publication of his novella 'Jakob Von Gunten' had been met with praise amongst the literary minded of Central Europe. Written as a series of observations, it chronicles the progress of a young boy taken in by a dilapidated school for servants, run by the brother and sister Benjamenta. It explores the

absurdity of his daily routines there and the hierarchical posturing of his fellow pupils and teachers. Franz Kafka called it his greatest literary influence. The Brothers Quay saw it as the basis for their first (and to date only) feature-length film, retitled *Institute Benjamenta (or This Dream People Call Human Life)*.

Despite there being very little animation in the film, and much of what there is has been lifted directly from *Tales From the Vienna Woods*, the Quays were eager to point out that this did not mean they were about to abandon the medium for good. *Institute Benjamenta* is, in every other sense, undeniably 'Quay'. It is dreamlike, sensuous and wryly funny.

With its first breath it riddles us an unfathomable riddle. The screen shimmers and shifts through a tableau of curiosities and extreme close-ups – a fork, a thimble, a little wooden deer – to the choral tones of Lech Jankowski's soundtrack. Lisa Benjamenta sleeps uneasily. "From far off," she tells us, "I am being approached." Through her window, we make out the tiny silhouette of Jakob Von Gunten hurrying out of the woods.

So much of the film is about unanswerable riddles and repressed desires. Jakob (played by Mark Rylance as an improbable cross between Stan Laurel and John Paul Satre) arrives at the Institute at first resigned to a life of servitude. "I have no high hopes of life," he tells the towering Herr Johannes Benjamenta (Gottfried John) at his enrolment. However, he finds it at once impossible to fit in with the other pupils or make complete sense of their one, endlessly repeated and ludicrously ritualistic lesson. He sets out to

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locate the institute's 'inner chambers' and unravel their mysteries. "Am I living in a fairytale?" he asks. For Herr Benjamenta and the starched, doe-eyed Lisa (Alice Krige), Jakob has brought with him the hope of release from the endless rituals of their lives. More dangerously though, he has awoken in them long suppressed sexual desires. The institute, its routines, and the sanity of its residents fall rapidly into decline. No more pupils are admitted.

The film finishes with its secrets and mysteries somehow still intact, and we are content to concede that in fact, there are no answers – the riddle is all there is – and all that lies at the heart of the institute is a goldfish in a dusty fishbowl.

Visually it is as hauntingly luminescent and otherworldly as anything the Quays have committed to film. The Institute itself, with its labyrinthine corridors and weirdly shaped rooms creates its own geography, seeming at times like an extension of the woods that surround it. Pine-cones and needles litter its corridors. Antlers hang on every wall. As the Quays put it: "We felt that the essential 'mysterium' of the film should be the Institute itself, as though it had its own inner life and former existence which seemed to dream upon its inhabitants, and exert its own conspiratorial spell and undertows."

The deer is a recurring motif, the icon of all things feral and socially forbidden within the Institute. When first we see Herr Benjamenta he appears to be hoofed. In one of the inner chambers a glass case displays 'the powdered ejaculate of a stag at the time of rutting season', while in the next an anamorphic mural, when viewed through

a peephole, reveals two copulating deer. And the cane with which Lisa masters her pupils is tipped with a tiny hoof.

Though a remarkably assured feature debut, the brothers felt understandably intimidated by their transition from short animation, which they likened to that of a composer's transition from chamber to symphony orchestra. The narrative is more linear than their shorter films, though the pacing can be a little difficult at times.

The Quays admit, with apparent embarrassment, to having resorted to digital editing during production, "for reasons of speed." At a time when megalomaniacal Hollywood directors strive to convince us of ever vaster computer-generated fantasies, the Quays' devotion to a more 'authentic' age could easily appear quaint (so too their rejection of the internet as a means of publicity), but the results are unquestionable. The very magic lies in their glitches and chance light effects, and in their dirt and clouds of chalk-dust. Like the custodians of some long-lost craft, the Quays understand the tools of their trade as nobody else could. Our fantasies have become too sterile.

For the past few years, the Quays have been working on their second feature, *The Mechanical Infanta*, a Hoffmanesque tale of an automaton which promises to incorporate aspects of animation and live action. Details are scant, but with reports that the action takes place in the quintessentially Quay-like fairytale environs of a secluded house flanked by sea and forests, it is probably safe to imagine that it will be everything we have come to expect, and like nothing we could have foreseen.

- 1992 **De Artificialia Perspectiva or Anamorphosis**
- 1993 **The Caligrapher Parts I, II, III**
- 1993 **Are We Still Married (Stille Nacht II)**  
video for His Name Is Alive
- 1993 **Long Way Down (Look What the Cat Drug in)**  
video for Michael Penn
- 1994 **Tales From the Vienna Woods (Stille Nacht III)**
- 1995 **Can't Go Wrong Without You (Stille Nacht IV)**  
video for His Name is Alive
- 1996 **Institute Benjamenta (or This Dream People Call Human Life)**
- 1997 **Black Soul Choir**  
video for 16 Horsepower
- 1999 **Duet – Variations on the Convalescence of 'A'**
- 2000 **The Sandman**  
design – for television
- 2001 **In Absentia**

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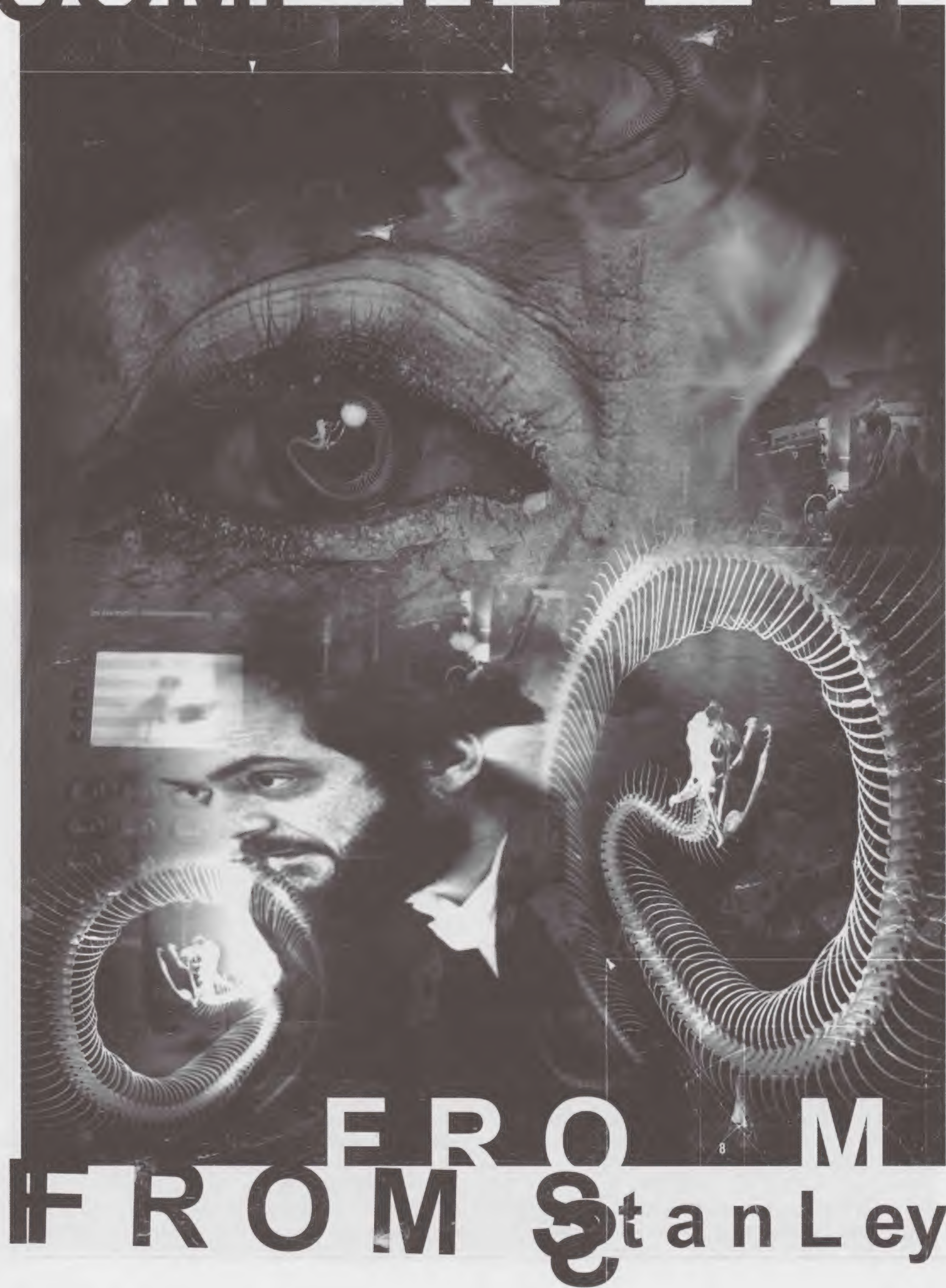
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{ CHARLIE WILLIAMS }

# SOME HELP



FROM FROM Stan Ley



**As luck would have it, I was drunk the first time Stanley Kubrick phoned me.**

It was a brief exchange, some time between three and dawn. I don't really remember much about the conversation. I think I might have sworn at him. You do when people ring you at that time and you're drunk. No matter how famous or dead they are. But when I woke properly, around eight, the knowledge that the deceased film director had been on the phone to me sat solid in my head, as tangible as the fake Rolex on my bedside table.

I blinked hard a few times and struggled upright. What else could I do? Life goes on. Bills need paying. You still have to pay the mortgage, even if the courts have ruled that you cannot live under your own roof. I hauled myself out of bed, slipped on my watch, and pulled on last night's jeans. They reeked of smoke. I had started smoking again three weeks earlier and the smell still made me retch. I stood up and paced around for a while. The floor was littered with video cases and beer cans. I binned the empties and put the cases back on the shelf in date order, from *The Killing* to *Eyes Wide Shut*. They were VHS. Sarah had kept the DVD player.

I needed water badly. Not just in my mouth. Water crashing down on my head, drumming against my eyelids.

I went along the landing to the bathroom. Someone was already in it. Probably the kid from the room next door who looked and smelled like a polecat. He also looked like he carried a knife. These were the kind of people I was reduced to living amongst. I never had this at home. There were three bathrooms at home. One up, one down, and one ensuite.

I sat down on the brown carpet and thought about those bathrooms.

Things were not too bad when I got to the warehouse. Not too good either, but that was nothing new. Most of my hang-over had melted away with the morning mist, leaving a comfortable blariness. Things seemed to be going OK out there on the floor. I still had half an hour before the next delivery. I decided to wile it away playing solitaire in my little office. At least that would get my mind sharp.

But before long my eyes were wandering sideways to the photograph I kept beside the monitor. Sarah, Tammy, and Josh. I would have to do something about that photograph, I guessed. It was no longer appropriate to keep a picture of my ex-wife on my desk. But the truth was that I didn't want to do something about it. I wanted to see Sarah's face during empty moments. Even if every look made me a little more drunk after work.

I had been examining it for several minutes when the phone rang.

"Philip?"

Sarah had never been in the habit of ringing me at work. Especially since the divorce. I felt a knot of anxiety tighten in my belly. Then I remembered that she wasn't my wife any more, and tried to relax. "Hello Sarah," I said, not relaxing at all.

"What are you doing, Philip?"

"Uh, what?" I laughed slightly. Silence fell.

She broke it. "If you want to know the truth, Tammy doesn't care. If you don't bother to arrange any visits it means she can spend more time with her friends, which I'm sure you'd agree is very healthy."

I said nothing. I tried not to breathe.

"But Josh is upset, Philip. Why have you stopped seeing them? What's going on, Philip? They're your kids too, much as I . . ."

"Much as you what?"

"Oh fuck off. Stay away if that's what you want. In fact it's probably —"

I hung up. My eyes went to the open door, checking for eavesdroppers. The phone started ringing again. I didn't answer it straight away. I took a couple of deep breaths, preparing myself. Then I picked up the handset and stated my name as calmly as I could.

"Philip. I'm glad I caught you. Are we feeling better this morning?"

It was Stanley Kubrick.

I half stood up and peered out of the grimy window. Everyone out there seemed to be busy. That in itself was suspicious enough. But no one appeared to be talking into a mobile. I said nothing.

"Is this a bad time Philip? Can we talk now?"

I swallowed hard, and with some difficulty. It felt like my whole mouth going down. "Who is this?"

"Come now Philip. Don't be playing hard to get. You knew I'd ring sooner or later. I'd really like it if we could talk now Philip. Is your head OK?"

"My head?" My head was not OK. My head was roughly as not OK as it was possible for it to be, short of accommodating the sharp end of an axe. But I couldn't tell that to the creator of *A Clockwork Orange* and *2001: A Space Odyssey*. "No, my head's fine. How are you?"

"Why thank you for asking, Philip. But don't worry about me. You know, it's not the amount you're drinking. It's *what* you're drinking. All that cheap beer. It's no good for a man. You should try some decent wine. Or port. Get some port."

I leaned into the monitor, trying to block out the rest of the building. I knew I was smiling. I couldn't help it. There was something musical about that slightly nasal voice. "Maybe I'll do that," I said. "Some port. We'll see."

"Philip?"

"Yeah?"

"Lemme change the subject for just a minute."

"OK."

"Things can't go on like this."

I said nothing.

"You know that, don't you Philip?"

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Come on, Philip. Don't kid me. I'm talking about your life here. You know? The one where you have a lovely wife and two beautiful children and an impressive home? The one where you're a good father and a caring husband? Remember that life that you once had? Do you?"

I was breathing hard. I tried to slow it down, but failed. "My life is fine," I said.

"Don't be giving me shit now Philip. Pardon my colourful language, but just don't be giving me shit."

The tannoy announced in a lazy female voice that there was an arrival in Bay 5.

"Philip? You still with me Philip?"

"Yeah. Uh, I've got some things to do now."

"That's right Philip. I'm glad you're finally seeing it that way. You do have some things to do. And you know what Philip?"

"What?"

"I'm gonna help you."

There was a sharp double-rap at the door. I glanced up. Barry the sub-foreman waved some dirty papers at me and nodded towards Bay 5. I waved back. He tapped his watch and walked away. I said: "You're going to help me?"

"That's right. And Philip, do me a favour will ya?"

"What's that?"

"Don't be telling anyone what we've been talking about."



I checked the house on the way home. The real house. Not the DSS shit-hole that I was now living in. I seemed to be checking it every day. I told myself that I just wanted to know that it was still standing, that it was doing its job OK, keeping a few people warm and safe.

It was still there. Nothing had happened to it.

I sat in my car for a while and worked on my smoking. Soon I would be back to my old standards: forty a day and genuinely appreciating every one of them. Nothing was going to stop me doing that. No court could order me to stop smoking. As the daylight faded I watched windows light up and curtains get drawn. Josh would be playing on his computer. Tammy would be lying down in her room, a phone clamped to her ear, moaning about some boy. Sarah would be getting some dinner together as best she could. Tammy would eat half of it and run back upstairs. Josh would whine about never getting decent food like pizzas and burgers. But he'd eat it anyway. Sarah would just take it all. She knew what kids were and she knew what did and didn't work with them. It was always me who did the shouting. A silver Mercedes pulled into the drive.

I looked at my watch. It was a good imitation. I had bought it off a man in a pub, not long after the divorce. It had glistened so brightly under the subdued lights. Only the ticking hands gave it away. A real Rolex glides. But this one was close enough. As close as I'd ever get anyway.

Despite being fake, it showed up well in the dark. 6:25. He was early. I should have another nine minutes before he slithered along. It was my right to sit and watch the house until 6:34 without having to see him stroll into it like it was his own. I squeezed my eyes shut and fumbled for the ignition key. But something stopped me. Something made me open my eyes and watch him get out of his car, draw himself upright to his full six foot plus, and walk briskly to the front door in his Burberry raincoat. He put a key in the lock and turned it. The door opened easily, without him having to shoulder it. I couldn't believe it. He had fixed the jam. That was *my* front door. If anyone fixed that jam it should be *me*. My mobile started ringing.

I hated that ring. Every time it went off I made a mental note to change it. But I never did. It rarely rang anyway. I had bought it so I could let Sarah know I was stuck in traffic and would be late home. She and the kids were the only people who knew the number.

"Hello?" I said in a fatherly, husbandly kind of way.

"Philip. I'm glad I caught you."

It was Stanley Kubrick again. My heart sank for a moment. Then it started beating fast.

"You really oughta stop with those cigarettes," he said in that strangely cultured Bronx accent.

As a rule I hated people telling me what to do. But it seemed OK from Stanley Kubrick. His voice had a way of massaging your shoulders as it shoved you along. I said: "Who is this please?"

"You know better than that. Now Philip, can we make a deal?"

"What?"

"You don't kid me, and I don't mess you around. Deal?"

"Sure. Deal."

"Now, what are we gonna do about this guy? That's what we're both thinking, ain't it? Don't worry. You don't have to say nothing. The worst thing you can say right now is that you're OK about this situation. That you've accepted how things are. That you realise that your wife just stopped loving you and needed someone else. That he seems like a nice enough guy and the kids probably love him. And most of all,

Philip, you don't have to tell me that you're just sitting here to reassure yourself that the house is still standing. So we're clear on that?"

I was silent for a few seconds. Then I said: "Yes."

"Good. Good. We know where each other is coming from. I like that. Tell me Philip, how much do you know about this guy?"

I told him how much I knew. I tried to be as objective as possible. It didn't leave much to tell.

"That's great. Are you aware of his weaknesses?"

I wasn't sure what he meant.

"His weaknesses. Achilles heels. Do you know where best to hit him?"

"You mean like, on the nose or in his guts? I don't know. He's bigger than me, you know."

"No Philip. We're on different wavelengths here. I'm not talking about exacting violent and bloody revenge. I'm talking about removing him from your and Sarah's lives in a way that leaves you smelling of roses. You understand?"

I told him, after a pause, that I understood.

"OK. Well don't worry too much about what you don't know. I'm gonna tell you what you're gonna do, Philip. I've been thinking about this for a long time, you know. It's gonna be beautiful. But first . . ."

"Yes?"

"Buy yourself some nice port. And go home. And Philip?"

"Yeah?"

"No more cigarettes."

It was a surprisingly pleasurable experience to buy four bottles of port instead of the usual armful of extra-strength lager. I wasn't sure why. There was something positive in it, a feeling of self-respect that you just don't get when you dump a clutch of four-packs on the counter. I even managed a rouè grin at the checkout girl without making her reach for the stalker alert button.

Back at the bedsit I poured some of the stuff into my DAD IS ACE mug and stood around humming inanely to myself like a senile vicar at a cheese and wine party. I looked up and down my video collection. I considered *Full Metal Jacket* and *Lolita*, but rejected them both. I wanted something upbeat. I wanted a happy ending. After a while I gave up and sat down, checking first that the telephone was within reach. I wasn't sure why I did that. I guess I knew it would ring. It did.

"Excellent, Philip. Much, much better. Ain't it?"

"I haven't tasted it yet."

"Well go ahead."

I brought the mug to my lips. At the last moment I hesitated.

"Whaddya think?" he said. "You drunk some now?"

"Yes," I lied. "Mmm, lovely."

"Oh yeah? I thought we had a deal about not shitting each other? Go ahead and take a glug."

I shrugged and went ahead.

"Nice?"

"Lovely. No, really. I like it."

"Good. Now, what were we into before we were into this?"

"Uh . . ."

"Right. Your ruined life. Remember? We were talking about doing some things about it. Getting it straight. And not only that, Philip. Not just getting your life straight. We can make something beautiful here. We can make your life a fucking masterpiece."

I found myself nodding. There was not a lot else that I could do. Truth was, I didn't doubt anything he was saying. How could I? This was somebody who you just didn't doubt. I sipped my port and listened.





"So this guy. What's his name?"

"Sleeter."

"Right. Sleeter. Christ, what a name. Anyway, so let's not forget who this guy is. This is the gentleman who took it all away, Philip. He stole your wife from under your nose. He appropriated your kids' affections, them being at an impressionable stage in their young lives. That's not fair, Philip."

"Not fair."

"And then to cap it all he usurped you from your own home! What kind of a man is this? You know, this set-up has the makings of a classic tragedy. There are some clear parallels with Hamlet here. But we won't go into them. Are you familiar with Schopenhauer?"

"Um . . . the name rings —"

"Never mind. Never mind. Let's not forget that a tragedy is what we want to avoid here. Uh, it's just not appropriate for this material. Now Philip. Do you mind if we touch on something a little sensitive now?"

"No." I really was enjoying the port. I don't think I had ever tasted port before.

"That's my boy. Can I ask why you think your wife left you?"

I took a substantial swig. I winced as it barrelled down my throat like a sackful of cats tossed down a laundry chute. "I'm not . . ." The port settled in my stomach briefly, then sent messages of hope and joy around my body. "OK. I think she left me because . . ."

"Go on. Take your time."

"Because . . . I'm not man enough."

"Right. And why'd she go for Sleeter?"

I sighed impatiently, then immediately regretted doing so. It didn't sound right. We were getting to the heart of my problems and here I was being an arse. No. I resolved there and then to give myself over to this dialogue. "I suppose because she reckons he's man enough for her."

"Yeah, yeah. And we can see why, can't we? Plenty of money. Nice and tall. Handsome. Genuine Rolex. Maybe he's hung like a mule. But we don't know that. That's just assumption.

The point is, these are all superficial things. Are these the things that maketh a man, Philip? Are they really?"

I was shaking my head.

"Of course not. So here's what we're gonna do. We're gonna show Sarah . . . Is that you're wife's name? We're gonna show her what he really is. We're gonna take off his mask and let her see the kind of man she's wasting her time on. An then it'll be your turn to step up and show her what a real man is. Are you with me still, Philip? How do you feel about this?"

My mouth was full of port so I couldn't answer. By the time I had swallowed he was talking again.

"Excellent. Now, how well do you know this Polecat character?"

There was a room in the house that claimed to be a kitchen. A sign on the door said it was anyway. Inside was a sink, an old microwave that looked like someone had exploded a tortoise in it, a brown thing in the corner that had once been a cooker, and not much besides. I poked and prodded here and there, unearthing interesting moulds and elusive scuttling things. Maybe this would have disgusted me once. But not now. It was just life with the fancy packaging removed.

I wasn't looking for anything. I was just passing the time. Apart from the bathroom, this was the only room in the house that was communal. My diet consisting entirely of takeaways and Pot Noodles, I had no need of it myself. But I knew that Polecat used this room. Most evenings before he went out I would hear the squeak of his trainers on the landing followed by the creak of the kitchen door.

Before long I heard the familiar sound of his footsteps. I sat down quickly and silently on one of the two plastic chairs that were the only furniture in the room.

Polecat stopped dead when he saw me. This was the first time I had made eye contact with him. In fact this was the first time I had ever seen his eyes at all. They were normally hidden in deep sockets. They glared at me for several seconds.

"Hi," I said in what I judged to be a friendly voice. The half-bottle of port helped with that one.



He looked beyond me at the wall behind. He grunted and turned to go.

"Er, excuse me," I said.

He stopped. "What?"

"Can I ask you something?"

He exhaled some air and shook his head. The look on his face matched the stink of his body. I could smell him from ten feet away. I wanted to grimace too. "What, man?" he whined. "Fuckin' 'ell."

"I just wondered if you were interested in a bit of work?"

"Work? Fuckin' 'ell man. What the fuck?" He was stepping from foot to foot in the doorway as if his bladder was fit to burst. All the while he was sneaking glances over my shoulder.

I looked behind me. There was a narrow cupboard door in the wall. I decided to put him out of his misery. "I've got money. Good money."

As expected, he stopped pacing and looked at me. "How much?"

"Two hundred."

"Three."

"Two-fifty."

He leaned against the wall and cocked his narrow head slightly to the side. "What work?"

Suddenly the whole idea seemed absurd. Hagglng was OK. I had done some hagglng in my time. But the next bit was hard. I had no idea how to begin. I tried in vain to recall the exact words that Stanley Kubrick had used. All I remembered was the telephone, the port, and the tightening knot of excitement in my belly. But I had to say something. If I didn't speak

up, the moment would pass.

Deciding that directness might be the best policy, I told him straight what I had in mind.

His weak mouth assumed a smirk that made you want to slap him hard. He started guffawing, although it took me a few seconds to work out what the sound was. "You want me to make you look like a hero?"

I was mildly surprised that he was capable of stringing a sentence together. My composure recovered, I said: "In short, yes."

"You want me to risk doin' time so you can impress some bitch?" The smirk was looking more like a scowl now. I wondered if that's what it had been all along.

I shrugged. "That sort of stuff. But please don't call her a—"

"Suck this," he spat, and grabbed his crotch at me, if such a thing is possible. Then he was gone.

"Hey wait!" I shouted, getting up. But already the mobile in my pocket was ringing. I slammed it against my ear.

"Hey take it easy," said Stanley Kubrick. "Keep your composure. That's it. Breathe. Better?"

I nodded.

"Now, turn around and open the cupboard door. Yeah. That one. Nice. Nice. Open? What's in there? Junk? Thought so. OK, look in the corners. Any cracks? Any little hidey-holes, the perfect kinda place to stash some . . . Hey what's that? Whadda ya got there?"

I was holding up a small clear plastic bag full of small clear plastic bags. Two contained white powder. One contained little bits of what looked like blotting paper with dollar signs





on them. There were other bits and pieces that were less easy to identify. I murmured all of this into the phone.

"Bingo, hotshot. Now open the window. Don't scratch your head like that. Just do what I tell ya, will ya?"

I opened the window in time to see Polecat emerging from the front door. He took a few steps out before, as instructed, I shouted: "Hey!"

He looked up. I dangled the plastic bag out of the window.

It worked. Suddenly his eyes bulged out of their murky sockets and his bony face turned white. He ran back inside.

"What the hell do I do now?" I whispered into the phone.

"Don't worry. You're on top. This is your scene. Things are going your way. Remember: you're a man. Be a man."

I didn't sleep much that night. I decided to sit down with the rest of the port and watch a double-bill of *Dr Strangelove* followed by *The Shining*. It soothed me to watch the films of Stanley Kubrick. I wasn't sure why. Maybe they just reflected the way I saw things, slotted painlessly into my own thought patterns. Maybe it was something beyond my understanding. I never gave it much thought. And this occasion was no exception. The movies kept my mind off cigarettes right up until 'All work and no play makes Jack a dull boy'. Then the port wrestled me to my bed.

I woke with a start the next morning, fully clothed. I looked at my watch, and was immediately struck by its overwhelming fakeness. It said Rolex on it. But not even a famous name could make it what it was not destined to be.

Anyway, it told the time, which was enough. And right now it was telling me ten o'clock. I looked at my phone and wondered why I hadn't received an early morning call. Maybe I had, which explained why I had awoken with a start.

I would need to hurry if I was going to get there on time. But I didn't panic. There was no need for panic that morning. Events were laid out before me. I knew things were going to work out for the best. All I had to do was get myself in the right place at the right time and follow the script.

I needn't have worried. The roads were strangely clear, even for a Saturday morning. Lights turned green for me. Buses pulled over. Long-term roadworks seemed to have wound up overnight. I kept my mobile on the passenger seat all the while, just in case. But at the back of my mind I knew I wouldn't need it. The groundwork was done. I knew my lines. The only worry was the doubtful character of the assistant I had recruited. If he didn't show up . . . Well, I didn't know what I would do.

I pulled over into my usual spot. My watch said quarter to eleven. I looked up the street. Polecat wasn't waiting where I had told him to. But I didn't let that perturb me. He had been chosen for a reason. Maybe he was just being extra sly, hanging back in the shadows. That was his bag. I had to trust him.

There was nothing to do but wait. I knew they would come out in time. I had watched them weekend after weekend. All four of them, laughing and holding hands. A nice beautiful family off to enjoy some quality time together. Sarah kissing him on tip-toe. Josh beaming up into his broad, sun-tanned face. Tammy not dragging her heels. They thought they were happy now. They thought that it was OK to turn me out and replace me with another. They thought that I wasn't good enough.

I didn't really blame them. I hadn't been doing so well in that role. I accepted that. But some things are inevitable. Some things you just have to go through in order to come out the other side. It didn't mean I couldn't be everything they wanted. It didn't mean I couldn't change.

It was laughter that I heard first. Tammy's, of all people. Someone must have been tickling her. That was the only

explanation. My whole body tensed as adrenaline flooded into it. They were walking down the drive. He had one arm around my daughter and the other around my wife. Josh was pulling up the rear, face to the floor. I didn't recognise him. He seemed taller and thinner all of a sudden. His hair was cut in a style shared with a lot of teenagers. It didn't suit him. And nor did sullenness. He was a boy. He was *my* boy.

A movement in the corner of my eye made me look up the street. Polecat. Shuffling along, head down, hood up, hands in pockets. The classic mugger. It was going to happen. I clenched my fists. The phone went off.

"Shit!" I reached clumsily for it and knocked it down the side of the passenger door. "Shit! Shit! Shit!" It kept ringing. I reached over and foraged around. Fag boxes and anonymous bits of paper, but no phone. It rang on. I knew it was Stanley Kubrick. "Shit!" Why was he ringing? A change in the script? At this stage? The man's perfectionism was legendary. But this kind of last-minute tinkering was —

The ringing stopped.

My heart turned cold.

Polecat.

I wasn't sure what was going on at first. My hired man was there alright, his back to me, brandishing something at my family and Sleeter. Josh was standing to one side.

Everything OK.

I took a deep breath. This was it.

One last look.

Josh jumped on Polecat. For a second my heart swelled with pride. Just for a moment I gave in to temptation and watched my boy, the hero.

Then it was over.

Tammy screamed first. Sarah shouted something and clutched at her hair. Josh fell to the ground, blood pumping from his throat. Polecat dropped the wet knife and ran. Sleeter took off after him.

I found that the engine was already running. Sometimes I wonder if I knew the real script all along, without having to be told it or even think about it. I swung into the road, clipping the rear bumper of the car parked in front. First gear was screaming by the time I had Polecat in my sights. I shifted up. Maybe that was my mistake. I don't think so.

You see, I don't think I made a mistake at all.

The impact was shocking. Arms slammed down on the bonnet for the briefest of moments. Then his whole body went under, throwing me out of my seat. I stopped the car a few metres up the road. Polecat hared around the corner up ahead. I looked at Sleeter's crumpled body in the mirror for perhaps a minute. All the while Tammy screamed.

I drove off.

Some time later I stopped and got out. I found a packet of fags and sat smoking by the side of the road. There was a drain between my legs. I could see the black water rippling far below. Suddenly I realised that I was clutching my mobile in my left hand. It started ringing.

"It was the only way, Philip."

I nodded.

"Some things you just can't avoid."

I smoked, listened, and nodded.

"A man is a man, no matter what else you paint him up to be."

The line went dead. I put the phone down. My fake Rolex slipped off easily. I dropped it down the drain.

Charlie's stories have begun appearing in various magazines, and his horror novel *Miserimus* is now being read by an agent. He lives in Hertfordshire.



**I love to walk behind women, look at them from the back.**

All you can see is the cut of their clothes, the fall of their hair and the way they move. Every woman is pretty from behind, because that's a view of the possible. You can't see the set of her lips or the disappointment in her eyes. She can't sneer at you, or look right through you. Yeah, there's nothing from behind but movement, possibility and hair color.

But every now and then, a woman will break her stride, or stop altogether, and look over her shoulder at you.

When that happens, you'd better head the other way, pronto. Because she knows *exactly* what you're thinking.

She can hear you.

Laugh if you want, kid.

Look, you ever wonder why there are bars like this one? Greasy little places with no windows and the only light comes from the televisions and a buzzing beer sign? Maybe a pool table, and one restroom out back facing the parking lot next to the empty kegs, right? Kind of place no woman is going to walk into on a bet?

No, Charlie, it's a damned fine bar and I love it. That's why I spend all my time and money here. And no, I don't want to hear about any unpaid tabs.

Sure, kid, you can buy me another one. Got to keep the story flowing, if you know what I mean.

Let's see, I was, what, thirteen? Woke up every morning with a woody and no idea what to do. Spent all my time peeking down blouses, me and every other boy in class. It's all part of the package, at that age.

Had a buddy by name of — well, Weston. Yeah, Weston Brady Wright. Twenty-dollar name on a two-dollar kid in a ten-cent town, that's for sure. We were more likely out behind Woolworth's looking for discarded paperbacks than out front watching cars like most guys. We loved it all: Doc Smith, John Carter of Mars, you name it. *Astounding*. *Amazing*. And the movies, oh Lordy. *The Thing*. *The Blob*. Weston's favorite was *Attack of the 50 Foot Woman*.

So Weston sends off for this kit he found in the back of a comic book, *Green Lantern* or something. Back in the Alan Scott days, when he was a real hero. This thing was in with the ads for see-behind glasses and home chemistry sets and plans to build your own amphibious submarine. You know, those little postage stamp ads looked like they were reprinted from a matchbook cover.

I guess they were all some guy in New Jersey with a post office box and a warehouse.

Weston orders this 'ESP Detect-O-Matic'. He figured we ought to find out if someone was watching us. Remember, this was the Red Scare. We pegged it even odds whether the Commies or the saucers would get us first. Weston thought the old black guy that shined shoes on Hervey Street in front of Woolworth's was a Red spy.

Don't laugh, kid. I know it sounds dumb, but in our day that stuff made sense. Who knew, in a small town down South? You probably believe in some pretty dumb stuff, too. Stock options or something.

This thing comes parcel post, and it's just a pair of black glasses with no lenses in them, a little earpiece and a couple of wires to connect up. The instructions were hard to make out, some flyspecked little print job translated into English from God knows what language.

What we finally figured was you wired in a battery, put it in your pocket, stuck the plug in your ear and wore the frames. Then any time someone with ESP looked at you, you were supposed to get a squeal in the ear, and you'd know to shield

# Watch the Pretty Girls, Kid

# Jay Lake

your thoughts.

I don't know kid. They didn't tell us how to do *that*. We figured that meant sing the national anthem to yourself or something.

So if you went out wearing these things, you'd look like Buddy Holly after he joined the Secret Service. Maybe they didn't really look that silly. People didn't point and laugh or anything, but I felt stupid.

Weston and I rode our bikes over to the train station. We were going to try the ESP glasses out on the passengers. We figured there might be Russian spies watching the station, looking for important secrets on the train.

We're sitting there on a bench, trying to look like we belong with the black porters and the paper boys. A whole bunch of older kids got off the 11:12 from Memphis. God knows why. Probably wanted lunch on the way to Texarkana or Dallas.



There were these tanned, handsome college boys in their matching letter sweaters, and their girlfriends wearing pedal pushers and button downs. We liked those crisp white cotton shirts with the buttons open at the collar. Then some girl comes off the train, heading toward the notions shop in the station, and she's wearing these little gym shorts. I mean, va-va-voom!

No, kid, it wasn't like now. Today you can sit on a bus bench and see just about everything walk by. Back then, girls didn't wear short shorts, not out in public. She must have been traveling with their college volleyball team or something.

We'd flipped for the glasses, and I had them. Weston says to me, look at that one. I glanced over, and started thinking I could worship those legs all the way up to her tushie, and just then she glanced back at me. Those glasses squealed in my ear like the loudspeakers at school assembly. I jumped like I'd been stung.

They worked, kid. Those stupid looking glasses really worked. That girl athlete was an ESPer and we knew she could read our minds.

We tried to order more. We sent off letters and money, and even tried to send a telegram. That little ad had disappeared from the next issue of the comic book. We never saw it again. All our letters came back marked 'Return to Sender, Addressee Unknown'.

We still had the one set. That was okay. Weston and I were all over town trying them out, waiting for the second set we never got. And we wanted to discover how well they worked.

We found out a funny thing.

Only women are ESPers. And they only heard us when we eyeballed them thinking bad thoughts. Watch the pretty girls, kid, and two out of every three knows you're watching. Worse, they know what you're thinking. It's a defense mechanism or something.

No, we couldn't hear what they were thinking. All we got was the squeal in the earpiece from the glasses. But we could tell.

How? Well, one day at school I had the glasses on in the lunchroom watching a crowd of senior girls. I wondered if Betty Sue Bradley's breasts were really that pointy or if she had one of those padded brassieres I saw in Woolworth's. Right then, she looked me in the eye and mouthed a really bad cuss word at me.

No, she was talking to *me*. You probably say it ten times an hour kid, but in my day we didn't use that word, especially not women. This pretty senior girl, all high-waisted legs and big bouffant, never said 'boo' to me before, suddenly she looks me in the eye from across the room *just as* I'm thinking about her bosoms and the glasses squeal real loud and I can read those two little words on her lips.

Here's the thing, kid. You look at a woman, you think, nice rack, or what a set of legs, or I'd sure like to — well, whatever, right?

Only what if she can hear you? A lot of them can, especially the pretty ones. And they know. That's why some men can't ever get dates. The ones that can't hold it back, can't keep their thoughts to themselves, they wind up drinking in places like this. Where pretty women never go.

Yeah, maybe the ugly ones, too, I don't know. I'd rather not know. We didn't bother with them.

So Weston and I figured out it seems to work up to about seventy-five feet away. I think that's why men buy magazines and watch dirty movies. They can see what they want, think what they want, up close and personal, and nothing happens.

Every guy knows deep down the pretty girls know what he's thinking. I just had the bad luck to have proof.

No, I don't hate women. They're fine . . . from a good distance. Seventy-five feet's about right, kid. And my friends are mostly gay. Thing is, fruits don't have wives. It's either gay guys or bowling leagues, and I'm lousy on the lanes.

I'll tell you what finally happened. We wanted to make sure the glasses really worked, that they weren't buzzing because our palms were sweaty or something. I mean, we'd been looking at pretty girls, and that can get a guy excited. So I was over at Weston's house and his mom was home. He didn't have a dad, Weston.

Mrs Wright was down in the kitchen and Weston had gone to get some air for his bike while I read his comic books. I figured the sure fire way to test the glasses was to think of the nastiest, crummiest thing I could think of about a woman, and go down and see if Mrs Wright could hear me.

So I got myself in a sweat about tying Mrs Wright up in just her foundation garments and smearing her with — well, never mind. I'd been reading too much pulp. I really freaked myself out, I'll tell you. I went down in the kitchen with this weird picture of her in my mind, which was gross but a little bit interesting at the same time.

Mrs Wright was standing there mixing cake batter when I walked in. I just stared at her for a minute, and I swear to God, those glasses started squealing in my ear and Mrs Wright turned around and licked that brown batter off one finger real slow and made a kiss with her lips. Then she said when I got a little older she'd think about it.

I had to throw up. I mean, I had thought of the grossest, sickest, most perverted thing I could, and Mrs Wright, Weston's mom — it was almost like my own mom. I started avoiding his house after that.

Pretty soon I couldn't handle being around the girls much at all. I mean, they knew what I was thinking, they knew I knew, I knew they knew I knew — it still gives me a headache forty years later.

Weston, huh? I told him I lost the glasses. He knew I was lying, but he never could catch me with them. After a while he laid off. But he changed, too. He liked knowing the girls knew he knew, you see? He found ways to use that to his advantage. Class president, lots of dates with the right girls. Or wrong ones, depending on how you look at it.

You're right, that's not really his name. He went into politics, made it big. Very big. Believe me, you know his face.

Secret Service, huh? You don't look old enough, kid. Guess I shouldn't have mentioned the politics. I figured he forgot me long ago.

I guess he never forgot the glasses. Wants them back, right? Yeah, I've still got them. It doesn't matter now. I'll give them up.

Hey, wait a minute. There's no need to get tough, kid. I'm coming. Nothing else I can do, is there?

Kid, tell me. Am I ever coming back?

No. That's it. I guess I know too much. Well, you could at least have the decency to pay off my bar tab. Expense it to your boss. He owes me for forty years of solitude.

Jay Lake lives in Portland, Oregon with his family and their books. He has one of those nebulous New Economy jobs that doubtless qualifies him for a career in speculative fiction, which he attempts on a regular basis to commit with Wordos, the Eugene Professional Writers' Workshop. His work has appeared in *Bones of the World* and *Clean Sheets*, and he is a Writers of the Future Finalist as well as an active reviewer at Tangent Online.



The  
Wells  
Ways

to the  
Halls





**Most of what I know about Neil Ashman I learned after he disappeared.**

I prefer to use that word instead of ‘died’, even though common sense suggests it. I never saw the body, after all, and that gave me enough hope to go on. There was that last image of him sprawled out on the floor, with something like a shadow pulling off from the wall. There wasn’t much light. I had long since decided to leave the city.

Silence had jumped ship a long time ago, leaving the harsh metallic echoes of the public transit loudspeaker to bark half-truths from the tube station. Dossers loitered in the crannies, licking their craggy lips and sneering at passers-by with open hostility. Even the cafés I chose to visit were already crammed with noisy after-workers by five-thirty. For one of our meetings I forced my way towards the back where I found Neil, guarding his usual table with his usual narrowed eyes and footballer’s shoulders. He loosened up a little when he saw me.

Most of his face was covered with hair, but the shiny top of his head shone through a few damp straggles of it. He looked terrible. Fleshy pouches the colour of old fruit sagged beneath his eyes.

After I sat down, he cast a glance around the room, then began shaking his head miserably. “This godless place,” he muttered. A few people looked over at him and scowled; a few others laughed. To try and draw his attention I pointed to his cupful of oily-looking coffee and said: “I think I’ll have one of those.”

His back arched over the wobbly table, making him pile his huge forearms onto its sticky surface. The sleeves of his overcoat smelled wet from rain or sweat, or both. From this position he kept looking out the window in the direction of the Vanbrugh Gallery.

The café was too full. The density of the crowd seemed to actually dim the light of the room. A fine, misty rain began to fall outside, and I knew the place wouldn’t empty out anytime soon. “We could go back to my flat, if you want,” I said. “I think there’s still something to drink there.”

Neil didn’t seem to hear. He simply maintained his steady gaze out the window. See-through ads declaring CAFÉ AU LAIT were burnished onto the glass. Their edges had begun to bubble from the steam clouding above the coffee machines. A waitress wearing a light blue outfit with absurdly flounced shoulders refilled Neil’s cup. I noticed right away that her arm was quite badly burned. She poured the coffee with practised ease, despite the fact that her flesh was blistered in reddish sores and charred blackened scabs. It was a wonder she even had it out of the bandages. Then I saw her face.

Her lips had been burned away, showing the rows of teeth crusted with dark ash. Above her scorched forehead a few strands of bristly hair still sprouted out like desert tumbleweed. Her eyesockets gaped emptily, and I saw thin tendrils of smoke eddy from each one as she moved.

I stood up, clearing the vision. “I’m leaving, Neil. You can come with me if you want.”

He shrugged, as though it didn’t matter one way or another, but I could tell that as much as the crowds unnerved him, he didn’t want to leave.

Out in the street, the rain was more felt than seen — it coated our faces with a cold filmy slime that eventually dripped in rivulets from the tips of our noses. I assumed we were going to Neil’s since he was leading the way in that direction, his head down and his fists crammed into the pockets of his overcoat. At the intersection of Piccadilly and Victoria, as we waited for a break in the endless line of cars hissing down the wet street, Neil said, in a voice almost too quiet to hear, “You saw it, too, eh?”

I hoped that I misheard, but knew I hadn’t. Before I had much chance to think of an answer, Neil was already halfway across the street.

Back in those days the Vanbrugh Gallery still looked like a cave on the inside. High ceilings, polished marble floors, the walls made of some roughly textured blocks. You couldn’t make any movement without producing an echo. You could never tell where the light was coming from. Huge rooms you at first thought were empty contained small exhibits by local artists.

We sat on one of the mahogany benches outside the little concession area. The place had already emptied of mothers with red faces trying to control their children, of Pakistani businessmen who wadded their coffee cups into the standing ash-trays. Neil stared ahead at the revolving postcard stand, his jaw working on something I’d not seen him put in his mouth. I didn’t need him to tell me what I saw back in the café, and I didn’t know if he planned on it. For the moment he seemed content just to be in the company of someone with whom he could talk, while remaining completely silent.

Eventually he said: “How does it feel to be the butt of God’s joke?”

I told him I didn’t see it that way. He didn’t laugh, as I’d thought he might. Someone had let in a gust of cool damp air from the street, which fluttered the pamphlets stacked on a table just inside the door. When I looked no one was there. Little bits of conversation drifted down on us from the balcony, reflected off the vertiginous dome of the ceiling. “I wouldn’t trade it for the world,” I lied.

“You may have to.” He handed me a card, on which an address was printed. “Rebecca Dwyer. You know her — wealthy socialite, mad bitch. This time tomorrow she’ll be dead of a brain aneurysm.” He pulled off his thick glasses and began rubbing at them with what appeared to be a greasy rag. “She’ll dream she’s burning alive, of course. You’ll see to that.”

I wanted to shut him up but there was nothing more to be said anyway. I looked around to see if anybody had been listening. Above, a hand pulled away from the balcony railing, which set off a flurry of echoing footsteps. Slow-moving attendants in dark suits emerged occasionally from behind a Lipchitz to hover around the skeletal Giacometti.

“Fuck off, Neil.”

I left him sitting there, fingering his empty coffee cup. Outside the rain had stopped but the air had grown unbearably cold. I waved down a taxi. As we edged away from the curb I tried to rationalise Rebecca Dwyer’s death. What did it matter if she died of a brain hemorrhage or of burning from the inside out? She was going to die anyway.

What did it matter?

I couldn’t get very close to the estate. It occupied about five acres beyond the western edge of St George’s Park, and was surrounded by a twelve-foot-high wrought iron fence. From the street, I watched the front gates open slowly outward to release a polished silver Bentley. The windows were tinted almost to black, but I knew Dwyer wasn’t inside. I found a crevice in the tall brick gateposts and sat down in there, my only view being of the green lawn as it sloped away on the other side of the fence. No one could see me. I relaxed and cast my mind out.

Things were coming to bits in The Circle. I could sense changes mustering on the horizon like gathering stormclouds. Neil saw it too. Sometimes I think he knew as little as I did about what we were doing back then. He had a nervous kind of energy that he fought to control even while you watched. I felt helpless. He had a single large room above Avery Antiques, which prompted him to shout out every time we walked by, “ave



yer any antiques?" To steady his hands he often gripped the edges of the window that overlooked the shop's striped canvas awning. On a clear day you could see almost a mile down Holme Avenue in either direction.

He always seemed on the verge of confessing something. I saw him motioning me toward the window. This was often how it started:

A wide carpeted staircase, curving upwards like a ridged dragon's tail, walls lined with old family portraits in gilt frames. Above, an elaborate chandelier catches the last of the daylight, fracturing it into a pointillist mosaic against the far wall. From the top landing, a hallway stretches out seemingly forever. The first doorway is wide open — a library. Every wall is dark with shelves of books as high as the ceiling, and that seem to absorb all the available light. Someone has moved a chair around to face a small table, in order to read by its old-fashioned lamp.

You approach from behind, where you can just make out the top of the person's head resting on the antimacassar. It's a woman of about sixty, her straight grey hair streaked with white. You hear her breathing — shallow and a bit laboured — but not your own. Otherwise the silence is only broken when she turns a page in the book. You begin to feel a warm sensation in your hands, not unpleasant, like warm water pouring over them, or out of them. You look down and see with some surprise that they are emitting a faint light, but from somewhere deep within, like the strange interior glow of an x-ray. The woman still hasn't noticed you. She turns another page, reaches up to massage the back of her neck. Without warning, a searing pain ignites in your hands, turning each one into a ball of barely-contained fire. You bring them down on either side of the woman's head. She screams. Her legs thrash and jolt violently, kicking out as you pin her head to the back of the chair. The book goes flying, the table is knocked over, dousing the light. Her hair directly beneath your hands burns away, releasing a scorched odour, and you hold tightly until her flesh becomes slick with blood. Her hands struggle to find yours with quick panicky movements. When they do, there is a sound like frying oil. Your fingertips find her eyesockets, which have already begun to bulge outward from the build-up of pressure. With a sudden outburst of noxious air she is burning, immediately setting the chair and carpet on fire. You back away quickly. By the firelight you can see your hands have returned to normal. Her body is still, engulfed in the flames that are rapidly spreading to the bookshelves . . .

My eyes snapped open. The Bentley had returned, and was pulling slowly through the opening gateway. I was still sitting on the sidewalk by the gateposts. It was already dark. I instinctively glanced down at my hands, which were sore from where they had rested on the bald concrete. When I reached the end of Waldorf Street I glanced over my shoulder before taking the steps down to the tube station. An arc of night sky above the estate glowed faintly, and I could hear sirens in the distance.

Some of the facts are muddled. Nobody remembered seeing anyone suspicious on the grounds that day, or ever. Arson was not ruled out, but neither did it seem very likely. I knew whatever conclusion they'd eventually reach would be the wrong one. By that time I'd already moved on. The Circle had apparently got whatever they needed out of it.

It was several weeks before I heard from Neil again. I stopped by the flat one last time before I planned to leave the city for good. Some old women were trying out the rocking chairs on display in front of Avery Antiques. They ambled carefully from one to the other, finding the seats with their huge buttocks before settling back with pained exasperated sighs. They'd start rocking, slowly building momentum, and stare blankly at me



through their thick-lensed glasses.

As I walked past to get to the side entrance, one of them stopped moving. I saw that she had a round black bullet-hole right between her eyes. Her head tilted back, levering the mouth open, which gave her a look like she'd just remembered something long forgotten until then. I watched as a thin trickle of dark blood dripped from her upper lip to the lower across the expanse of her slack breathless mouth.

Ever since Rebecca Dwyer I'd stopped having visions of people burning to death. What I now saw had somehow taken its place. I had a vague idea of what it meant, but my limited experience had shown me that nothing about The Circle was that easily understood.

"That's how they get you," Neil once informed me. "Just like that. By keeping you just ignorant enough to make you wonder."

The thing that always drove him crazy was the possibility they had no power at all. That they kept us in line by threat alone, by innuendo or sleight of hand. This was never a concern for me. I was much younger than Neil at the time, a bit brash, in hindsight probably too careless. I had this power, or what I mistook to be power, and that was all I thought I needed. Neil had it too, but I think he was losing it.

I rang the doorbell and heard it sound from somewhere deep inside the flat, muted and dulled by humidity and shag pile carpeting. I imagined him sitting in there among stacks of yellowed out-of-date newspapers and peeling linoleum, basking in the thin grey afternoon light. The smell of cigarette smoke would have gotten into everything, his clothes, the sofa covers, even the kitchen utensils piled in the sink. The television would be off, sitting dormant under a thick layer of dust but with him staring glassily at it anyway, using it as a focal center perhaps. This would release his mind to hover above the crowded streets and swoop down like a hawk, plucking at the thoughts it found there.

He didn't answer the door. I even pounded on it, hard enough to shake the frame, but it didn't rouse him. I knew someone was in there — a presence not entirely physical that seemed to push outwards on the door against my efforts. I backed away, my hands raised slightly, not at all sure what to expect, certainly not wanting to cast my mind inside the flat. As I walked east on Holme Avenue I heard a voice say very distinctly behind me, "Ave yer any antiques?" I looked back over my shoulder but didn't see anyone.

The bullet turned out to be for a retired doctor living in the West End. When I cast my mind out, I ended up in his bathroom. He was taking a shower, and I could barely see through





the steam. I sat down on the toilet for a few minutes until I heard the water turn off, feeling the damp air soak into my clothes. When he yanked the shower curtain back, I was waiting. I fired the shot low on his forehead, and the back of his head and most of his brains exploded out onto the tiled surround. His body dropped like a bag of laundry, with the blood and brain matter racing down the tiles to meet it.

I was told he would've died of a heart attack that same day. I never questioned how they knew. But I did wonder why I saw visions of people either dead or dying of the same wounds I'd be inflicting later, if only in their minds. How The Circle made it reality was beyond me at that time.

My new house was set in clear view of the street, but there never seemed to be any traffic. One day I opened the door and a youngish boy of about twenty stood there, not quite able to look me in the eye. I'd been expecting him. We mumbled our greetings and I led him into the front room, where he sat down among the velvet-covered throw pillows on the *chaise longue*. He was wearing a black T-shirt, the sleeves roughly shorn off to give his thin white arms a tough look. His head looked recently shaved, and a cigarette pack was tucked into the cuff of his military-style boots.

He said he'd like some tea.

As I was making it, I thought about where they might've found him. It didn't really matter. Sometimes we just found each other. I could never ask, of course, and he'd never tell. Secrecy was the code in The Circle, even amongst its members.

When I returned with the tea, he was levitating a brass candle holder in the space between his hands. It floated and bobbed there, like a rubber duck in clear bath water, as he slowly moved his hands around it. His forehead puckered with concentration. When he saw me standing there watching him, he grasped the candle holder out of the air and replaced it on the table.

I said: "There's no need to be nervous."

"I'm not."

I put down the tray and poured two cups. "You already know how this works or else you wouldn't be here. You should have no questions." And later, when I handed him the card, I said: "By this time tomorrow the man whose name is on that card will be dead — a suicide. It won't matter how he does it. They want him to dream of a bomb blast, planted by you of course."

I watched the boy study the card in silence for a moment before adding: "You should probably know he's one of our own." It didn't seem to matter. After committing the information to memory he tore the card in half and laid it next to his crumpled serviette. He left without saying goodbye or thanking me for the tea, reminding me a bit of myself from about twenty

years ago. I finished my tea and swilled out the empty cups. I pieced the card back together, perhaps hoping that Neil Ashman's name and address wasn't still printed on it, that there'd been some fatal mistake made.

Mistakes had no doubt been made, but not this time.

When I first became involved with The Circle, some of the younger members had adopted a kind of anarchist saying, apropos of nothing: 'The Time is Now'.

Just now I'm sitting in the back of my jeep in the Sahara desert, in a natural basin about three hundred miles north of Mali. I have an old tarpaulin extending off the rear of the jeep towards two metal supports, providing an adequate shelter from the African sun. I didn't bring a sleeping bag — I can't afford to sleep. The drugs in my satchel will also help with that. I have an unobstructed view extending three or four miles in any direction around my campsite. No one can cast their mind out over that distance. I'll be able to see them coming, but of course they'll have thought of that already. They also know I'll have to sleep sometime.

Neil never lost any of his power. In the end he probably had more than any of us. Had he been saving it up?

After I sent the skinhead youth away I caught the Number 12 back to Sutherland, where a taxi shuttled me from the tube station to Neil's flat. A cold rain had been cutting down all day, and the wooden steps leading up to his door felt pulpy under my feet. I raised my hand to knock before I saw that the door was already open slightly.

Rain had pooled on the linoleum just inside the front door, soaking the edge of the living room carpet. The flat was blazing hot, the furnace having kicked on to battle the flow of cold air from outside. My first thought was that Neil had ransacked the place — most of his wall hangings looked skewed against the faded green wallpaper, stacks of old newspaper had toppled over to fan out on the carpeting. Unwashed pans lay scattered across the kitchen floor; ants moved along the speckled Formica countertops. But this drab tableau seemed oddly settled, like the dust that covered everything, as though it was the normal state of things.

After stumbling around helplessly for a few minutes, I reached the bathroom door and found Neil sprawled on the floor alongside the bathtub. From the smell alone I guessed he must have been dead for some time, but I'm no longer sure about this. I needed to sit down. Clearing off a section of couch I found mail that hadn't been opened in weeks, many of them from the utilities. I sat there in the diffuse late-afternoon light, listening to water drip from a tap, feeling a kind of pressure



on my ears from the silence. Despite the realisation of my new position in The Circle — I was to assume the role previously held by Neil — I still felt strangely lulled.

If Neil had built up a psychic bubble in the room, would it have escaped through the open door? Or could it still hang on, clinging limply to the television knobs or the coat stand like a burst party balloon? I assumed he wanted to trap whoever came for him, whoever cast their mind out, in this case the skinhead youth. Stop them from leaving since there was no way to stop them getting in.

I don't remember if I fell asleep or not. I don't think I did, but I suddenly became aware of someone else sitting in the room with me. At first glance I didn't recognise him. He had a young but firmly-set face, deep eyes. He wore a dark overcoat. His hands emerged from its sleeves like two massive conch shells, deeply ridged and curved inwards upon themselves. I realised with some shock that this could've been Neil at a much younger age, fresh out of University and full of resentment. I tried to get up but felt frozen to my spot.

"Life is its own dream," I remember him telling me once. "Not ours."

The man got up and stood by the window, watched for a moment the traffic labour up and down Holme Avenue. He seemed on the verge of telling me something, or launching himself out the window. Whatever the case, he never got the chance. Something like a stain began spreading down one of the narrow partition walls. By the time we both saw it, it had already become a shadow, falling obliquely away from a figure now standing in the room. It was the skinhead youth, holding what looked like a B-movie parody of a bomb with its overlarge coiled wiring and gleaming transistors inside a chassis. As soon as I realised what was happening I lunged for the door. Somehow I didn't feel like I was leaving Neil behind, more like he was letting me go. Giving me a first-hand glimpse of what we were doing to people, to ourselves, and the chance to try and do something about it, something useful. Giving me a taste of that mortal fear.

I didn't know how far outside the flat Neil's psychic hold extended, how much if any had leaked outside that door. I tripped down the last few steps, nearly smashing my head on the cement. I was a block away before I stopped running, but I suppose I'm still running even today, and probably always will be.

The sun has dropped behind a distant plateau, turning the sand the colour of rust and hazing the blue-green skyline. Pretty soon everything around me will be pitch black and I'll have to ignite the lamp. I'm not sure what Neil had hoped I'd accomplish outside The Circle, or why he couldn't go the same route and come with me before it was too late. Maybe he wanted to warn them, to show them what we were still capable of if they came after us, or anyone else who wanted out. Sometimes late at night I see lights moving around the base of a sand dune three miles to the northwest. It could be a jeep like mine, or a pair of hand-held torches. A lost traveler, or someone setting up boundaries, examining the battlefield.

Will they try to invade my thoughts, not even waiting until I fall asleep? Trick me into putting a gun to my head? Do they have ways of doing that, ways they never told us about to keep us in line?

Or maybe Neil was right all along, and they had no power at all. Hoped we'd never find out as they stood looking down on us like zookeepers, studying the movements of the deadly snakes. Would Neil have died in vain, then, if indeed he was dead?

By lamplight I pull a small notebook out of my satchel. It has served different purposes over the years, at the same time jour-

nal, photo album, and a kind of wallet. I have Polaroid snapshots taped to some of the pages, along with vague scribbles underneath indicating the time and place the pictures were taken. 'Queen's Cove, 1973 — bloody hot!' On some of the older ones the tape has grown yellowish and brittle. Things were rather different back then. We were new to it, careless, reckless. We knew so little about each other but still felt a camaraderie, a bond shared by virtue of our talents. The Circle never forbade friendships, but certainly discouraged them by keeping us moving — one day you were in London, the next Morocco or even Belgrade.

We were anarchists and rebels. Lovers and killers. One picture shows Neil sitting on a bench in a train station, eyeing me above the newspaper he's holding open with both hands. He's smirking, the extended middle finger of his right hand clearly visible to the camera. He still had most of his hair in that one, in fact was rather young and good-looking. What different lives we all could've led, I sometimes think. With wives and kids and family friends. Normal lives.

Perhaps that was his last hope for me.

I can already see lights moving around down there. They'll be here soon. Maybe they won't bother with my mind. Maybe they'll just drop napalm on me from an aeroplane.

I've had to remove the mirrors from the jeep. I was catching glimpses of my own reflection, of the burned and ripped flesh, of the sparse hair on top of my head smoldering in the desert wind.

Scott was born in 1969, and currently resides in the USA where he works as a graphic designer. He's had a couple of short stories published and has a novel in progress, *Total Occupancy*, which he 'can only describe as a non-supernatural haunted house story'.

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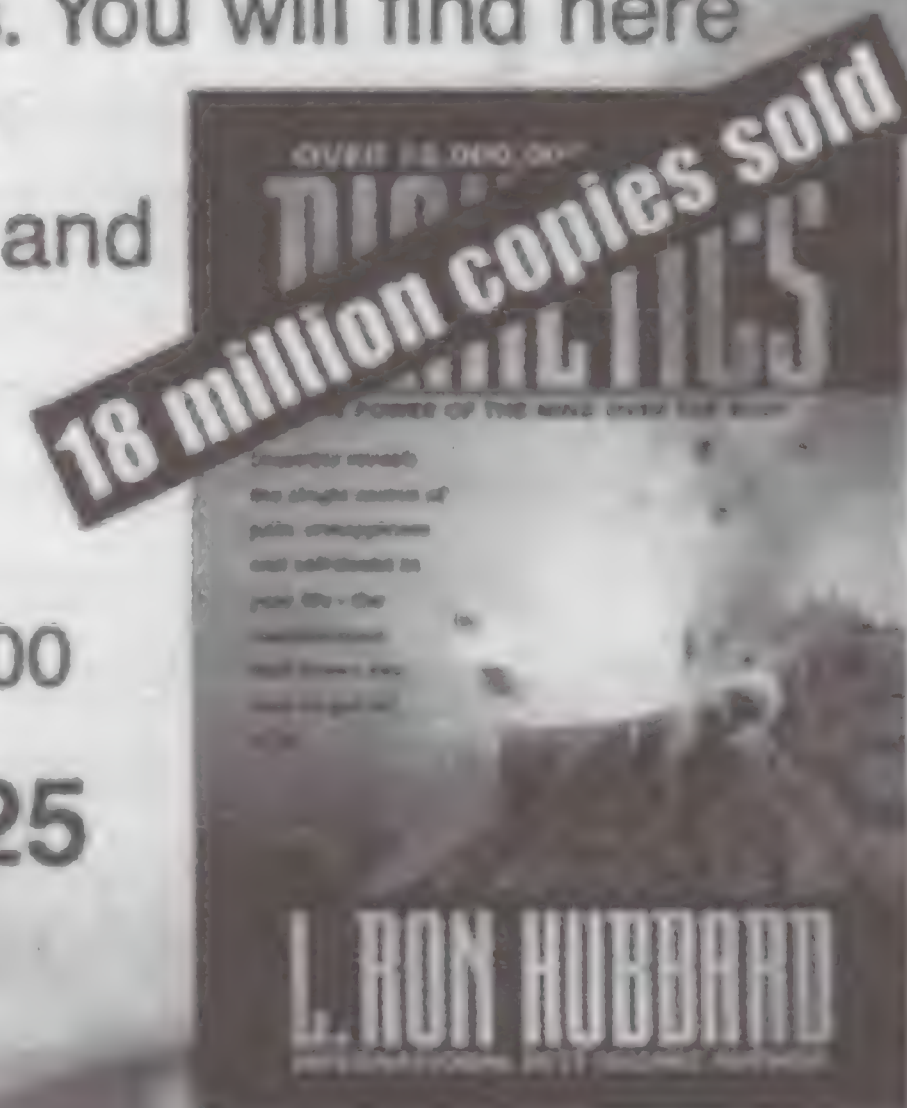
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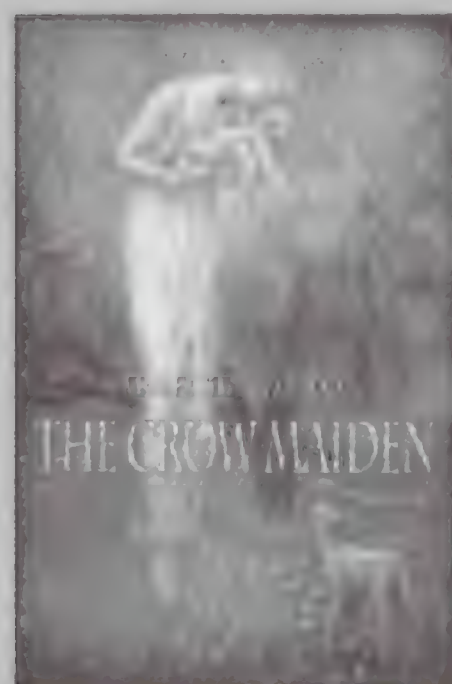
## NOVELS

## THE CROW MAIDEN

Sarah Singleton

Cosmos pb, 236pp, £12 (order from [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com))

reviewed by Andrew Hedgecock



Its roots may lie in the Celtic oral tradition but the tale of migration between the realms of human and faerie is a perpetually popular form. And Sarah Singleton's first novel, *The Crow Maiden*, is a welcome addition to a sub-genre that includes some of the twentieth century's finest fantasy novels – Hope Mirlees's *Lud-in-the-Mist*, John Crowley's *Little, Big* and Neil Gaiman's hugely underrated *Stardust* to name just three.

Set in Wiltshire with its ancient woods and sacred landmarks, the narrative has two main strands. There's the struggle of a loose alliance of squatters, travellers, green activists, pagans, tree-dwellers and local conservationists to prevent the building of a bypass and the destruction of an ancient woodland and barrow. The second strand concerns the departures to, and arrivals from, the domain of the faeries – the English dreamtime.

Singleton introduces a realistically rendered cast of characters and swiftly draws us into their world. They include: Katherine, first to contact the enigmatic faeries, a young woman struggling to reconcile parenthood with personal needs and longings; her partner, Paul Maltravers, an architect drifting into the role of full-time activist, whose contact with these sinister visitors is harrowing, exhilarating and life-changing; and Jo, a cross-dressing Goth leading a life of booze and tawdry glamour, who gradually begins to engage with the socio-political – and supernatural – forces that shape his life. And then there's Elaine, who dresses like 'a hippie Tess of the D'Urbevilles', a strong and sometimes confrontational woman on an obsessive quest to escape the quotidian world and achieve communion with the mysterious forces that haunt the local landscape. As the characters cross each other's paths, Singleton conducts a humane but unflinching examination of the psychological changes they undergo and the shifting dynamics of various relationships.

The narrative is a meandering pastoral: environment, costumes, conversations and events are set out in painstaking detail. But it's certainly compelling and Singleton develops an utterly convincing portrayal of the impact of supernatural activities on human psychology, politics and social affairs.

And there's a penetrating and perceptive analysis of the forces that shape their lives, expressed in the form of polarities of need: material versus spiritual; freedom versus the need to belong; the longing to escape versus social responsibility . . .

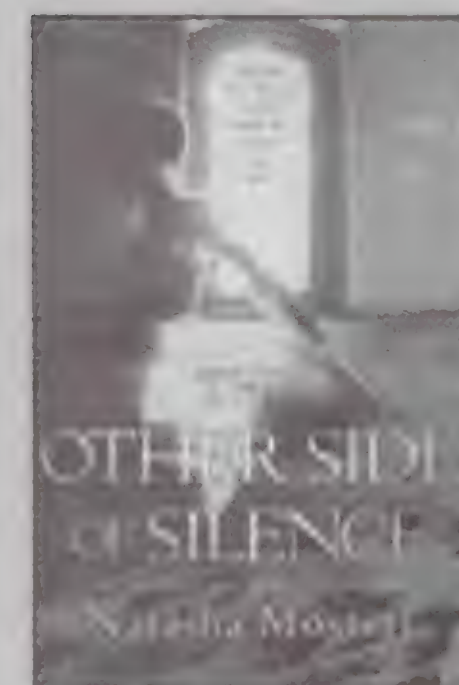
*The Crow Maiden* is an absorbing debut: inventive, rich, allusive, touching, frightening.

## THE OTHER SIDE OF SILENCE

Natasha Mostert

Hodder &amp; Stoughton hb, 354pp, £17.99

reviewed by Paul S Jenkins



Towards the end of *The Other Side of Silence*, in an attempt to understand what's going on, Natasha Mostert's main character reads this passage in an encyclopaedia: 'If the Pythagorean Comma is ever eliminated, the world will be in possession of a perfect musical scale and, according to mythology, the Music of the Spheres will become audible. It is predicted that this momentous development will be signalled by great turmoil.'

Apparently all musical instruments have to be tuned very slightly off key, as a conventional musical scale is not a perfect mathematical relationship. The Pythagorean Comma is a kind of fudge-factor to account for the discrepancy. Set in present-day or very-near-future South Africa, this novel is about an attempt to eliminate the Pythagorean Comma.

Three programmers have written some software that will calculate the perfect musical scale, thus eliminating the Pythagorean Comma. As the task requires enormous computing power they have developed their program as an addictive game that people play for free on the internet. The game-players' computers become part of a worldwide distributed processing facility.

One of the programmers has heard about some strange musical rocks in South Africa, on land owned by the novel's main character, Tia Theron, a woman whose mother disappeared in curious circumstances. The programmer, Jon Falconer, must persuade her to let him examine the rocks.

The novel is superficially gripping, almost trashy. It reads in parts like a romance, but in others like the dramatisation of a university thesis (including the extensive bibliography). While the characterisation goes only so deep, the setting is evoked in a workmanlike manner. The motives of the protagonists are shown, to a degree, and the science, the pseudo-science and the apocalyptic mysticism are all laid out for the reader, if not actually explained. That said, there's a shallowness that leaves one ultimately unsatisfied. The characters tend to be stereotypical, and those that aren't (for instance the nerdy geek who turns out to be more sinister than he first appears), don't convince. The reader, therefore, doesn't really care for them much. In the end the plot doesn't hang together; it's science fiction of the softest kind, more appropriate to films and TV movies, where viewers are considered to be less demanding.

It's not just the science that seems ill-explored. For example, the main character, Tia, is an assistant professor at Johannesburg University, though we never find out what exactly her job is. She's reasonably



sympathetic, but she falls too easily for the man who wants to examine the rock-gongs on the extensive tract of land she inherited from her mother. Early in the book we learn that she's writing a novel, but we never see her doing this, nor do we learn what it's about. For many writers, writing a novel is an all-consuming passion, but with Tia it's hardly mentioned, and one can't help wondering if Mostert felt the same way about *The Other Side of Silence*.

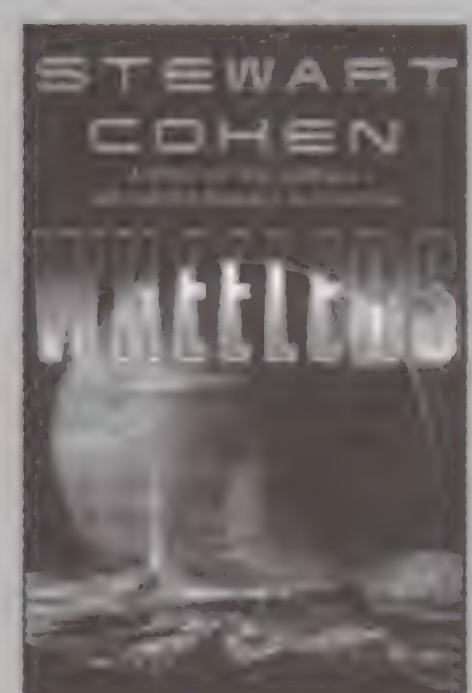
It's a good story with many interesting ingredients, but with missed opportunities to explore fascinating issues at greater depth, and therefore the whole adds up to no more than the sum of its parts.

## WHEELERS

**Dr Ian Stewart and Dr Jack Cohen**

Earthlight pb, 505 pp, £10

reviewed by Ian Simpson



A Mathematician (Stewart) and a Biologist (Cohen). A debut novel. Not necessarily an encouraging start, and after the first hundred or so pages, I thought my prejudices had rung true. Some clichéd characters, basic dialogue, a mish-mash of ideas (far too many, it would seem) and seemingly unconnected plot strands. But then, like the ingredients to homemade apple pie, it all comes together wonderfully. This occurs once we have discovered the aliens. Allowing for the unfortunate necessity to make them think in Earth-centric concepts (they call Jupiter 'Secondhome', but call themselves Jovians), the description of their society and the science behind it starts to reel you in. You become engulfed by their lives, curious about their history and intrigued by their role in the impending disaster on Earth.

Pru is a space age Indiana Jones, with fewer morals, but with a past that explains her position. She has been cheated out of a successful career by her then Professor Charlie Dunsmore. However, he isn't quite the person she thought he was, as he seeks redemption from his callous acts during his own highly successful career – the one he stole from her. Then there's her nephew, Moses, who understands animals (which is one of the unfortunate plot shoehorns). And what do the mysterious neo-Zen monks who occupy the asteroid belt have to do with anything? On top of that, there's the Vidivisual crew, who discover the initial signs there is something wrong, and work out that life on Earth is coming to an end. Add to that the museum curator (who is the main let down, as she is just there to finance missions which the plot would otherwise not allow), and we have some well developed, compelling characters.

And what of the Wheelers? These are the tools of the Jovians, ingenious in their concept, one that links the story arcs together. They have names such as Robin Reliant.

You'll have to read the story to find out why.

As a 'first contact' novel, this is one of the most original and enjoyable I have read. There are a few too many concepts and unnecessary plot threads; almost as if the pair were enjoying themselves a little too much. But in the end, despite the shortcomings, it works well as a great, unputdownable, thoughtful, adventure in space.

## WRINGLAND

**Sally Spedding**

Macmillan hb, 547pp, £16.99

reviewed by Peter Tennant



Warning to the faint-hearted: this is not going to be pleasant. *Wringland* has the unhappy distinction of being the worst book I've ever had to review. Let me put that in context for you: I once reviewed James Herbert's *Creed*. Nuff said?

The plot. Twentysomething Abbie Parker moves to the isolated village of Black Fen to take up her job as on-site saleswoman for Kingfisher Rise, a luxury housing development. There are problems. For starters the housing development shares character traits with that out of *Poltergeist*, right down to skeletons in the ground and inexplicable mud slides. For seconds there's the local vicar, who in two hundred pages or less goes from mildly obnoxious to the kind of unstoppable serial killer who makes Michael Myers look like a big softie, with no real explanation for this change of heart other than that he 'hears voices'. At the back of it all is the vengeful spirit of Martha Robinson, who died over a hundred years ago and, for never satisfactorily explained reasons, has decided to start acting up now. Martha plucks a plane out of the air mid-Atlantic and causes a car crash in Italy; she is the sort of malevolent entity, beloved of lazy horror writers the world over, who can do absolutely anything except apparently splat the heroine and put the rest of us out of our misery. It rattles along in this vein for five hundred or so pages, with detours into child abuse, a malaria plague killing off the locals and an unnatural pregnancy for Abbie (cue several pages of hand wringing about how awful it all is, then a stillbirth of something monstrous, after which it's all promptly forgotten and we move on to something else), before fizzling out with plot fatigue.

The impression left in the mind is of someone who's watched a dozen bad horror movies and thought it would be a doddle to write a book by patching together all the really 'good' bits. Spedding's writing is typified by the inability to craft an elegant sentence, often lapsing into the sort of purple prose that makes Herbert look like F Scott Fitzgerald on a roll. Add to that non sequiturs and lapses in continuity, while the unique Fenland atmosphere, so powerfully evoked in Graham Swift's *Waterland* for one, here consists of a few ominous sounding place

names and salting every other chapter with words like 'bog' and 'peat'. The characters all seem to be afflicted with a personality defect that prevents them acting consistently for more than a few pages at a stretch, undermining any hope of reader identification or empathy. Abbie can't decide whether or not she wants children, if she wants her job or to become a farmer, if she loves her boyfriend Simon or wants to shag her boss, and so on and so forth.

Even the logical underpinning of the story is suspect. Nobody ever expresses serious doubt that the supernatural is involved; the minute there's a bump in the night they're all shouting for an exorcist, even Simon who, as a career drunk, might reasonably be expected to have some doubts about what he's seeing. The social services and the police are portrayed as uncaring and incompetent nitwits, except when being efficient will get them to the right place and at the right time to be slaughtered. I can think of nothing to recommend this book. Even the photo of Sally Spedding on the back cover is indifferent; is it too much to ask that the author look straight at the camera? Some critics say Horror is dead, and I don't agree, but after reading this load of old wank it's hard not to feel I've had my nose rubbed in something that's been left out of the fridge for way too long.

And yes, thank you, I do feel much better after that.

## THE ASTONISHED EYE

**Tracy Knight**

PS Publishing hb, 192pp, £35

reviewed by Peter Tennant



Ben Savitch returns to the town of Elderton, Illinois, from which his family moved when Ben was only seven. He's now a cynical and world weary reporter for *The Astonished Eye*, a tabloid at the more sensational end of the spectrum, and he's come to Elderton to follow up on reports of a UFO crashing. Aliens are only part of it though. Elderton is a place where magic is real. There's a dead girl walking down the main street and the town's resident genius has brought to life a superhero out of an old television series. Ben has stumbled on the story to end all stories, but in breaking it to the world he may just kill the magic.

Elderton and its people are a hybrid of Bradbury's Green Town and television's Eerie, Indiana. Savitch is pretty much the good guy gone bad and finding redemption in a Capraesque story, while the alien doesn't serve much purpose except to stumble around spouting inanities. Sentimentalism is the keynote, nostalgia for the good old days of Mom, Dad and Apple Pie, topped up with belief in the magic to be found in ordinary lives. While there's nothing much original here, the idea is a worthy one and Knight makes a reasonable fist of getting



it down on paper. The end result though is very much a take it or leave it production. However . . .

I paid £35 for a book once. It was a biography of the artist Max Ernst, the size of a paving slab, stuffed with colour plates and worth every penny. There's nothing about this though to justify twice the cost of a standard hardback. Don't fall for the collector's item nonsense. Little effort has been made to make this book special. Compared to those produced by Sarob Press or Telos it's very ordinary. Okay, it's been signed by Knight, cover artist Alan Clark and (golly, gosh, wow, pardon me while I have an orgasm!) Philip Jose Farmer, who writes the introduction, but so what? Of course, given that the standard PS Publishing novella costs £25 in hardback, £8 in softback, possibly we're supposed to applaud their restraint on this occasion. Independent press books are always going to be more expensive than those in the mainstream given lower print runs, and I certainly don't begrudge publishers and writers payment for their work, but there's a line between profit and profiteering, and I'll take a lot of convincing that PS don't cross it.

#### THE DEVIL AND MISS PRYM

**Paulo Coelho**

HarperCollins hb, 201pp, £10.99

reviewed by Peter Tennant



Coelho's latest novel poses an interesting moral dilemma. A man comes to the remote village of Viscos, where a century's old way of life is staring extinction in the face. He offers its inhabitants ten gold bars if they will commit a murder. At first repelled, the villagers soon start to rationalise what they are about to do in terms of one sacrificing for the many, though curiously, or perhaps not, the one isn't consulted by the many. It's up to Chantal, the Miss Prym of the title and the subject of a side wager, to find a way out for everyone.

I enjoyed the last book that I read by Coelho, but this time around the publisher's hype, describing him as 'a storyteller with the power to inspire nations', has me waving my arms about like Robbie the Robot on speed and shouting 'Warning! Warning!' Those kind of guys always end badly, as witness the example of one Mr Adolf Hitler and his Mein Kampf.

Fortunately Coelho takes a more humanistic and inclusive approach than the moustached madman. This is a beautifully written book with a deceptive depth for such a slim volume. The characterisation and dialogue are spot on, while the timeless feel of Viscos and its people's way of life is convincingly rendered. As a depiction of the moral confusion arising out of personal tragedy and how easily people can be reconciled to evil the book is compelling.

On the down side, the religious convic-

tions that permeated *Veronika Decides To Die*, to which this is intended as a sequel of sorts, are here presented more overtly, with Angels and Devils prompting the characters to act, a device offered as fact rather than metaphor. It intrudes an element of sideshow into a drama that would've worked far better without it, tending to devalue human effort. And at the end Coelho cheats, completely sidestepping the moral dilemma he's elaborated at such length and so well. After promising much *The Devil and Miss Prym* only part delivers.

#### A BIG BOY DID IT AND RAN AWAY

**Christopher Brookmyre**

Abacus pb, 502pp, £9.99

reviewed by Peter Tennant



Raymond Ash is a school-teacher, a responsible man with a wife and baby depending on him. His dreams of fame as a rock star are firmly in the past. Then one day, loitering at Glasgow Airport, Ray sees his old 'friend' Simon, a prima donna he used to be in a student band with. There's only one problem: Simon died three years ago when terrorists blew up the plane he was travelling on. For Ray it's the start of an adventure for which his computer game skills have ideally equipped him, one that brings him together with policewoman Angel X in a fight against the world's leading terrorist, 'the Black Spirit'.

Recent events have given Brookmyre's novel an unhappy topicality and it has perhaps the worst opening sequence I've ever read, the whiny, egotistical rant of an embryonic terrorist that almost had me abandoning the book by page twenty, but fortunately I persevered and was rewarded with a fast paced and credible crime thriller, one laced with humour and hefty dollops of satire. However what makes the book stand out is the author's understanding of his three leads, their aims and motivations, filled in piecemeal as Brookmyre lays out the back story. Simon is the ultimate poor sad wannabe, made bitter and twisted by failure, hungering for recognition even if only as a murdering psychopath, blaming everyone except himself when things go wrong. Contrast that with Ray, outwardly a failure, the paradigm of male doubt, a bundle of neuroses and unfulfilled longing, but muddling through the best that he can and trying to do what's right by everybody, thus acquiring a dignity and worth forever beyond simple Simon, no matter how many innocent people he blows up. And then there's Angel X, the gorgeous Angelique de Xavia, the most redoubtable female super agent since Modesty Blaise last slipped a pistol in her stocking top, a karate black belt and the scourge of bullies everywhere, a straight talker who shoots from the hip. Confronted by psychobabble about the motivation of the Black Spirit Angel X cuts

to the quick with, 'He's a wanker!' If you want she can be more precise, 'He's a big wanker!' More insightful, more truthful, and definitely a lot more fun than a hundred TV documentaries about Osama Bin Laden.

#### PASSAGE

**Connie Willis**

Voyager pb, 594pp, £11.99

reviewed by Peter Tennant



Psychologist Dr Joanna Landers works at Mercy General Hospital cataloguing the Near Death Experiences of patients declared clinically dead and then revived. She agrees to work with neurologist Richard Wright, who's found a drug to induce NDEs and hopes that better understanding of their true nature will provide clinical rewards. Joanna believes that his research might benefit Maisie, a ten-year-old heart patient with whom she's developed a special bond. When Dr Wright runs short of volunteers Joanna agrees to be a subject, experiencing at first hand what, until now, she's only heard described by others. But Joanna's NDEs take a form that's entirely unexpected; she appears to be aboard the passenger liner Titanic just after it hit the iceberg. The explanation lies with Joanna's old English teacher Mr Briarley, a Titanic buff now stricken with Alzheimers.

In previous novels such as *Doomsday Book* and *Lincoln's Dreams*, Willis has made similarly oblique use of historic fact to telling effect. The 'famous last words' that head each chapter and the information about the Titanic's fate and other great disasters that lace the text help create a fascinating backdrop to a compelling scientific detective story, one that develops into a race against the clock. There's great characterisation too, especially of the wonderful Maisie, one of sf's great kids, whose precocity never seems in doubt, and in the picture of Mr Briarley and his carer Kit Gardiner it offers the most believable and heartrending account of senile dementia that I've ever read. But though sad don't go away thinking this is a depressing book. The picture of the human spirit coping with adversity is uplifting, and it ends with a vision of death that approaches the majestic.

Then there's the irritation factor. As an example, Dr Wright has a subject called Mrs Highton who, thanks to her busy social whirl, is continually calling to reschedule appointments. We get this not once or twice, but about thirty times. Willis seems incapable of making a point without she labours it. Over and over again we hear how Mercy General is a maze in which people are always getting lost, how the cafeteria is always closed and the ER is dangerous, how Joanna is always hungry and Richard always has food in his pockets. Then there are Mr Mandrake and Mrs Davenport, two NDE nutters who Joanna is continually



avoiding. In fact, although she appears to be up for sainthood, I found Joanna quite irritating. For a psychologist she's badly in need of assertiveness training, so she won't let all these people and things go on wasting her (and my) time. These running jokes become a tax on the reader's patience. They add about fifty pages, but nothing else.

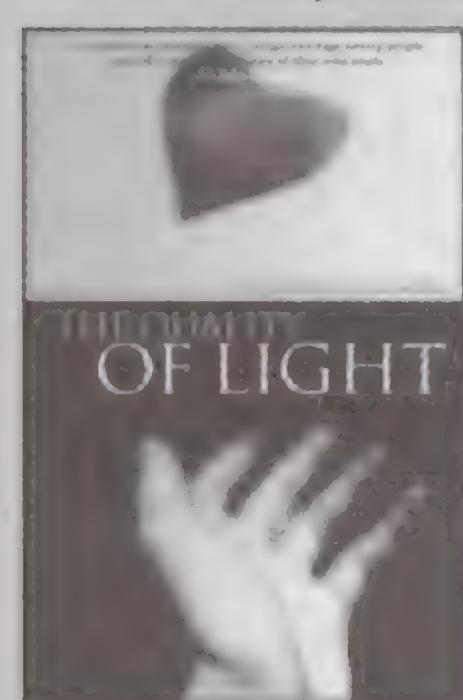
I don't want to detract from Willis's achievement. *Passage* is a very good book, a substantial book that tackles serious themes in an intelligent and insightful manner, and certainly worth a few hours of any reader's time. It'll probably win the writer more awards to put on her mantelpiece, and deservedly so. But inside the good book there's a better book struggling to get out. It needed a strong editor to tell Willis to cut all the crap.

## THE QUALITY OF LIGHT

**Christopher Kenworthy**

Serpent's Tail pb, 208pp, £10

reviewed by **Andrew Hedgecock**



Christopher Kenworthy's second novel, *The Quality of Light*, is an unflinching examination of the emotional ravages, socio-political alienation and spiritual pain from which the modern psyche tries so hard to insulate itself. A subtle, enigmatic and densely symbolic narrative, it marks a significant step in Kenworthy's development as a writer: it has all the intense introspection and claustrophobic energy of his darkly engaging debut, *The Winter Inside*, but the writing is more subtle, powerful and unsettling. And it takes the reader on a journey into the contemporary psyche every bit as compelling as it is harrowing.

Kenworthy's vivid and original characters follow a series of obsessions. All amateur pilots, they share a longing to take to the air; they seek beauty and meaning in a bleak but symbol-saturated world and take part in regular 'rages' – curious ritual gatherings in which they discharge the pain and chaos they've gathered from other people.

The narrator, Marcus, a self-obsessed and unsettled young man living in the desolate former shipbuilding town of Barrow-in-Furness, 'a zone laid waste by government indifference', seeks significance in the conversations of the drunks he follows after closing time and discovers he can see – and 'harvest' – physical emanations of psychic pain. Marcus's fellow aviator and pain harvester, Patrick, seeks new places and prophetic experiences by driving until he runs out of fuel. Katie, nineteen years old and obsessed with her squint lines, begins to see curious patterns of light. The other characters, all deftly drawn and utterly convincing, include Nicola who abandons her old life for flying, and needy, damaged John Gavaurin – a man with an astonishing knack for attracting violence.

Kenworthy's rendition of the violent, dis-

enfranchised and forgotten zone of Barrow – with its 'vicious and gobby' kids and 'sodden and gritty air' – is a fictional location as dark, menacing and brilliantly realised as Daphne Du Maurier's Venice in *Don't Look Now* and Gerald Kersh's London in *Night and the City*.

The book is crammed with memorable set pieces. Some highlight the brooding atmospherics and eerie light of Barrow, others focus on the strange rites of the 'rages', but the ones most likely to burn on in the reader's memory long after the final page is turned concern the trials and pleasures of intimate relationships. 'I can't think of many writers who handle the messiness of human communication and sexual need with greater elegance and flair than Kenworthy. His laconic sketch of a teenage relationship getting locked into a cycle of dependence adroitly captures several strands of human sexual development: 'We spent the whole summer locked up in my bedroom, with the curtains drawn, getting pissed on cider and giving each other oral sex'.

There are so many layers of symbol and significance in *The Quality of Light* that it's impossible to capture its essence in a brief review. Lust, beauty, detritus, violence, joy, transcendence, terror, post-industrial alienation, doomed communication and fraught relationships: Kenworthy's novel is worthy of the old slogan of the *News of the World*, 'all human life is there'.

An intelligent and compassionate novel: it deserves a huge audience.

## THE REVENANTS

**Geoffrey Farrington**

Dedalus pb, 245pp, £7.99

reviewed by **Peter Tennant**



Farrington's 1983 novel, re-issued by Dedalus and with an introduction by Kim Newman, pretty much follows in the footsteps of Anne Rice, while studiously avoiding use of the V word.

The book is the testimony of John Richard Le Perrowne, an unhealthy young man with morbid tastes, who is turned into a vampire by one of his ancestors. Having learned how to control his bloodlust and rejected the philosophy of his peers, who see humans simply as foodstuff, John roams the world for decades in Helena's company. Her death at the hands of a priest gives new urgency to his existence, and after a botched stab at revenge he sets out in search of the fabled Master-Revenant, the one who can give meaning to his unnaturally prolonged lifespan.

There's not a lot to be said about this. It's the usual angst ridden vampire schtick made so popular by the success of *Interview*, well written and avoiding a lot of the post-Dracula clichés, as Newman points out in the introduction, but ultimately a case of been there, done that and spilled blood on

the T-shirt. What was fresh and new in 1983 now seems old hat. New Vampire has become as anodyne as New Man, apparently unaware that there's nothing more pretentious than soul searching when you're not supposed to have a soul. I prefer *Buffy*, where in the main the vampires are blood sucking fiends and the humans are appropriately 'grateful'.

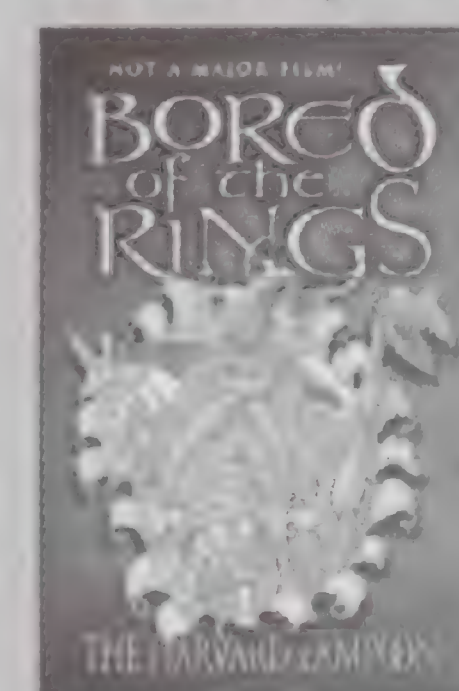
## PARODIES

### BORED OF THE RINGS

**The Harvard Lampoon**

Gollancz small format hb, 228pp, £6.99

reviewed by **Antony Mann**



We likes this, my preciouss, yessss we does! Here is a handy complement to *Lord of the Rings* fever – see the movie, buy the bubble gum, even read the book if you have to, but whatever you do, make sure you get hold of the parody. *Bored of the Rings*, by Henry N Beard and the ill-fated Douglas C Kenney (he fell off a cliff in 1980), has been reissued in hardback to cash in on Ring fever, something of which the authors would have heartily approved. No doubt Beard still does.

If you're one of those Tolkien fans who visits JRR's grave dressed as Gandalf, then you may find the idea of an antidote to *Lord of the Rings* a tad heretical. If like me you're someone who's read the book six times but still wonders why Gandalf didn't simply give the One Ring to Gwahir the Windlord and point him in the direction of Mount Doom on page six, then you'll appreciate this book. You don't need to have read LOTR, but it does help, because BOTR follows the story faithfully. But if I tell you that Tom Bombadil becomes Tim Benzedrine, Bilbo Baggins is Dildo Bugger, Gandalf (Goodgulf) is a cheap trickster who can barely pull a rabbit out of a hat, and Aragorn (Arrowroot) is a clumsy, stupid, craven murderer, and those are his good points, you'll get the picture. All that, and it's funny too.

## NOVELLAS

### SHAMANSPEACE

**Steve Aylett**

Codex pb, 121pp, £6.99

reviewed by **Andrew Hedgecock**



Steve Aylett's new novella holds up a distorting mirror to the philosophies, belief systems and cognitive structures that underpin the way we live and think. And it tests the possibilities of prose-fiction to breaking point. Baroque, passionate, lurid and demanding – it's an intimidating fusion of metaphysical meditation, poetic rant and alchemical adventure.



The central conceit of *Shamanspace* is that Friedrich Nietzsche jumped the gun – metaphorically and literally: God isn't dead yet, merely on the hit lists of competing orders of assassins striving to achieve transcendence through the obliteration of divine power. The Internecine – the ultimate nihilists – subscribe to a mutant form of the 'Manichean Heresy' of the Cathars: whacking the architect of the universe will bring universal annihilation. For the opposing faction, the Prevail, rubbing out the Deity is a cosmic coup d'état, the next step in the evolutionary transformation of the human condition. The front runner to implement the hit is Alix – an ether travelling assassin with a cult following who has been sent in pursuit of Quinas, a renegade shaman.

The pared-down narrative is compelling, but it's Aylett's wit, invention and intensely resonant language that constitute the main attractions here. Aylett throws down a gauntlet to the reader, challenging us to cope with an ambiguous rendition of a world that is disconcertingly familiar and bewilderingly strange by turns. The fictional zone inhabited by Alix and the assassins is deftly sketched through throwaway references to the trappings of etheric warfare: ghostbelts, dematerializations, etheric traps, cabalistic grids, sacred telemetry and assassins in recovery from 'phantomburn'.

And there are moments of hallucinogenic detail that could have graced one of Iain Sinclair's oneiric travelogues: 'He seemed as harmlessly proud as a library lion but he could pour iceflame from his mind and freeze a moment for inspection, the air ghost-ly as cathode light.'

There's a tendency for critics to concentrate on the Aylett as an innovator. But the ballistic poetry of his tales, his ability to contrive a convincing but provisional mise-en-scène and his anarchic rejection of any kind of authority – even that of the Supreme Being – places him in a tradition linking Lautréamont, Kenneth Patchen and Pierre-Albert Birot.

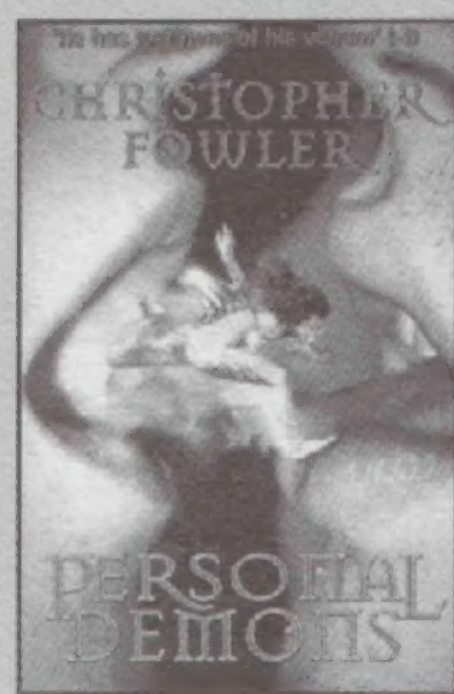
## COLLECTIONS

### PERSONAL DEMONS

**Christopher Fowler**

Serpent's Tail pb, 308pp, £6.99

**reviewed by Peter Tennant**



Until recently I've always preferred Fowler's short stories to his novels (for the record *Calabash* caused me to reconsider), and this re-issued 1998 collection of seventeen contains some of the best work he's produced, startling and innovative, but firmly rooted in the traditions of a genre the author has made his own.

Which is not to say everything in the garden is coming up roses. There are a few nettles. 'Scratch', about the dire fate of a

Lottery wannabe, is flimsy, a poor joke play-d out at story length. 'Phoenix' starts with a man learning the fate of the world hinges on his actions, then continually ups the stakes in the manner of a bad movie trading in plot for bigger and better explosions. These and a couple of others are bucking the trend though.

'Wage Slaves' takes the old cliché of a haunted building, transplants it to a shiny new office tower, adds a soupçon of social comment and underpins it all with some marvellous pseudo-science. 'Midas Touch' has a character out of Greek myth going about his business in modern London, a story that adroitly builds to a startling conclusion, while in 'Unforgotten' a rapacious property developer satisfyingly falls foul of the city's dark side. The best stories are those where Fowler eschews the supernatural in favour of making the human central, often introducing an element of genuine compassion. 'Armies of the Heart' treats powerfully of homophobia and the unreasoning hatred it entails, while in 'Permanent Fixture' a lonely woman's life is redeemed by the cheerful camaraderie of a football crowd. 'Looking for Bolivar' reads like a witty, urban version of Ray Bradbury, with an eccentric old lady transforming the lives of all who come into contact with her. And then there's the last story in the book, the iconoclastic and metafictional 'Learning to Let Go' in which a writer deconstructs all the elements of the supernatural story, finally announcing his decision to abandon the form for something else.

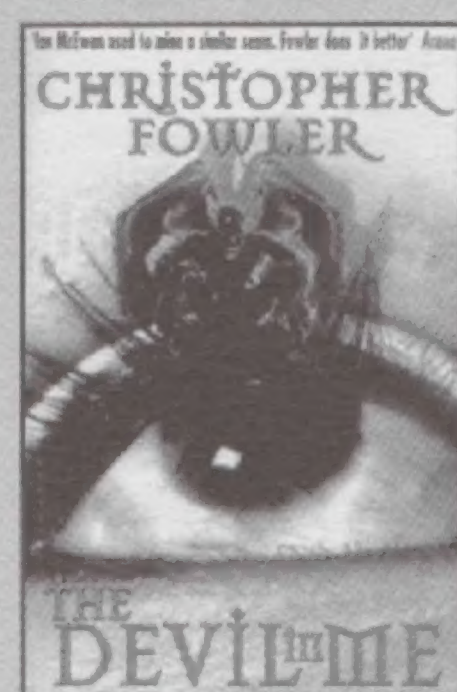
Ladies and gentlemen, Christopher Fowler has left the building. Fortunately he left *Personal Demons* behind for the rest of us to savour and enjoy.

### THE DEVIL IN ME

**Christopher Fowler**

Serpent's Tail pb, 246pp, £10

**reviewed by Peter Tennant**



Fowler's latest collection consists of twelve pieces, each with an informative introduction, and comes good on the writer's declaration in The Foreword that it contains no traditional horror stories, though nobody should be in any doubt that the horrific is still a vital ingredient of Fowler's work, or that fans of the genre will still find much to enjoy. Another Fowler trait in evidence, one other writers might do well to emulate, is the willingness to experiment with narrative form, to take risks instead of churning out formulaic tales, though it has to be conceded that this doesn't always serve him well. *The Devil In Me* is a weaker collection than *Personal Demons*, and about half the stories don't quite come off.

'Sex Monkeys' sounds like a good idea but in reality is just random incidents strung together to little or no point (imagine Schnitzler's *La Ronde*, but with sex toys provi-

ding the causal links). 'Eighteen and Over' starts well, using satire to make a point about censorship, but goes so over the top it ends gasping for breath in the upper stratosphere and arguably provides ammunition for the viewpoint it set out to discredit.

'Seven Dials' is a contrived piece of nonsense about the search for missing property deeds, while 'Rainy Day Boys' offers nothing more than an urban legend with trimmings. 'Something For Your Monkey', according to the intro inspired by reading Wodehouse, is too hard and cynical to succeed as pastiche. In fairness though, once you get past any false expectations it works quite well as a biting satire of the whole celebrity thing.

The good stories are remarkable. 'At Home in the Pubs of Old London' is an oblique and strikingly original portrait of a serial killer, describing only the places where he meets his victims and leaving the reader to decipher what's really going on. Similarly 'Crocodile Lady' ignores all the usual conventions to give us a battle of wills between a killer and a teacher in forgotten corners of the London underground. 'The Look' is a barbed and venomous satire of consumerism in general and the fashion industry in particular. The internet is used for random acts of kindness in 'The Beacon', a character driven and ultimately moving human interest story, while 'Come On Then, If You Think You're Hard Enough' deftly polarises attitudes to homosexuality and illuminates the masks some feel forced to present to the world. The Dahlesque twist in the tale piece, 'Living Proof' has a writer commissioned to do someone's biography and unearthing rather more than he's supposed to.

Fowler is a craftsman who's mastered his art and produces work that is always interesting, even when the stories fall short of their author's ambition, while at his best he's a writer anyone who appreciates the short form needs to be aware of.

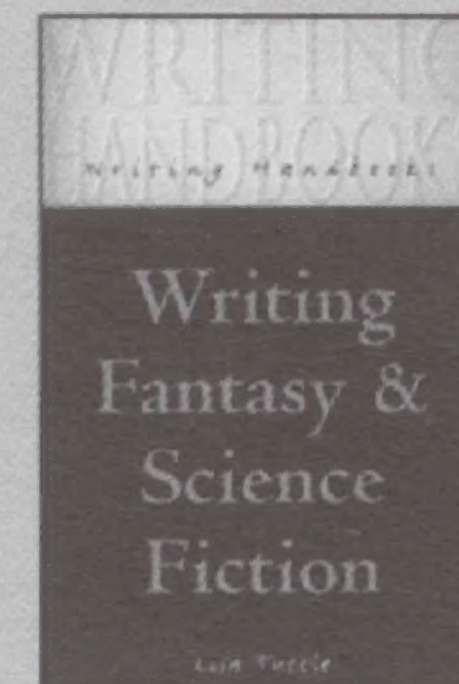
## POP-FICTION

### WRITING FANTASY & SCIENCE FICTION

**Lisa Tuttle**

A & C Black pb, 167pp, £9.99

**reviewed by Tony Mileman**



The skills needed for writing fantasy and sf are no more different than any other sort of fiction: 'a good story, believable characters and a fluent, readable style' are essential. Award-winning author Lisa Tuttle starts with an investigation of the different types of fantasy and sf, then examines the sources of story ideas, with examples drawn from her own writing experience; indeed, much of the book is autobiographical. We are then led through the importance of landscape in sf and fantasy,



a parameter 'equivalent to that of a major character'. This is all background material to prepare you for the practical aspects of structuring and developing your story. Concerning outlining, she advises that you do a synopsis of a few paragraphs or pages in length – 'writing may become a chore,' she warns, 'if you've left yourself nothing new to discover.' An excellent chapter on viewpoint and style follows.

You've written your novel and now 'the fun part' begins: rewriting. Tuttle reveals that for the second draft she simply starts all over again, 'without referring to the first draft'. If she is unable to progress she goes back to her first-draft text and copy-types the relevant section. It's an interesting approach, one that is perhaps worth attempting. Moving on to the short story, of which it 'can be easier to make that first breakthrough into publication', there is advice from Ellen Datlow about the type of stories she's looking for. A later chapter contains illuminating interviews with editors from several top publishers discussing the type of fiction they want, and *don't* want to see.

The next major section investigates writing for children, and how it differs from adult fiction; the theme of transformation – for example, poverty to riches, schoolboy to wizard – is seen as an essential element, this mirroring the change from child to adult. Finally, there's an examination of the co-authoring process, with an exchange of letters between the author and George RR Martin charting the development of *Windhaven*.

Overall, this is an invaluable handbook packed with sound advice for the aspiring fantasy or sf writer.

#### THE MODERN WEIRD TALE

**ST Joshi**

McFarland & Company pb, 278pp, \$34.95

**reviewed by Tony Mileman**

This is a critique of contemporary horror fiction, examining the literary merits (or lack of) of many of the leading voices in horror.

In his introduction, Joshi argues that the whole approach to weird fiction is flawed, because it concentrates on the emotion of *horror* instead of utilising the supernatural in a distinctive world-view 'as a metaphor for various conceptions regarding the universe and human life'. Horror fiction he claims should focus wholly on the weird 'with the human figures subordinate to the general weird conception'. This philosophy is evident in the works of Thomas Ligotti and Ramsey Campbell, and absent for instance in the writing of Stephen King.

Split into five parts, the first section examines the complex and subtle work of Shirley Jackson, who along with Ramsey Campbell (given a whole section in part three, *The Fiction of Paranoia*) are the two leading writers of weird fiction since Lovecraft. To emphasise this proposition, in the following section – *The Persistence of Supernaturalism* – Joshi investigates two

bestselling writers that he believes are of little importance in the genre, notably Clive Barker ('slipshod writing [and] a lack of depth and substance') and Stephen King ('an unmitigated disaster for the weird tale'); although King's *Rage* and Barker's *The Damnation Game* ('a sparkling, flawless weird novel') come out unscathed.

Thomas Ligotti has complained that many horror novels are essentially suspense/mystery tales with interludes of the supernatural. This argument is taken up in part four – *The Alternatives to Supernaturalism*

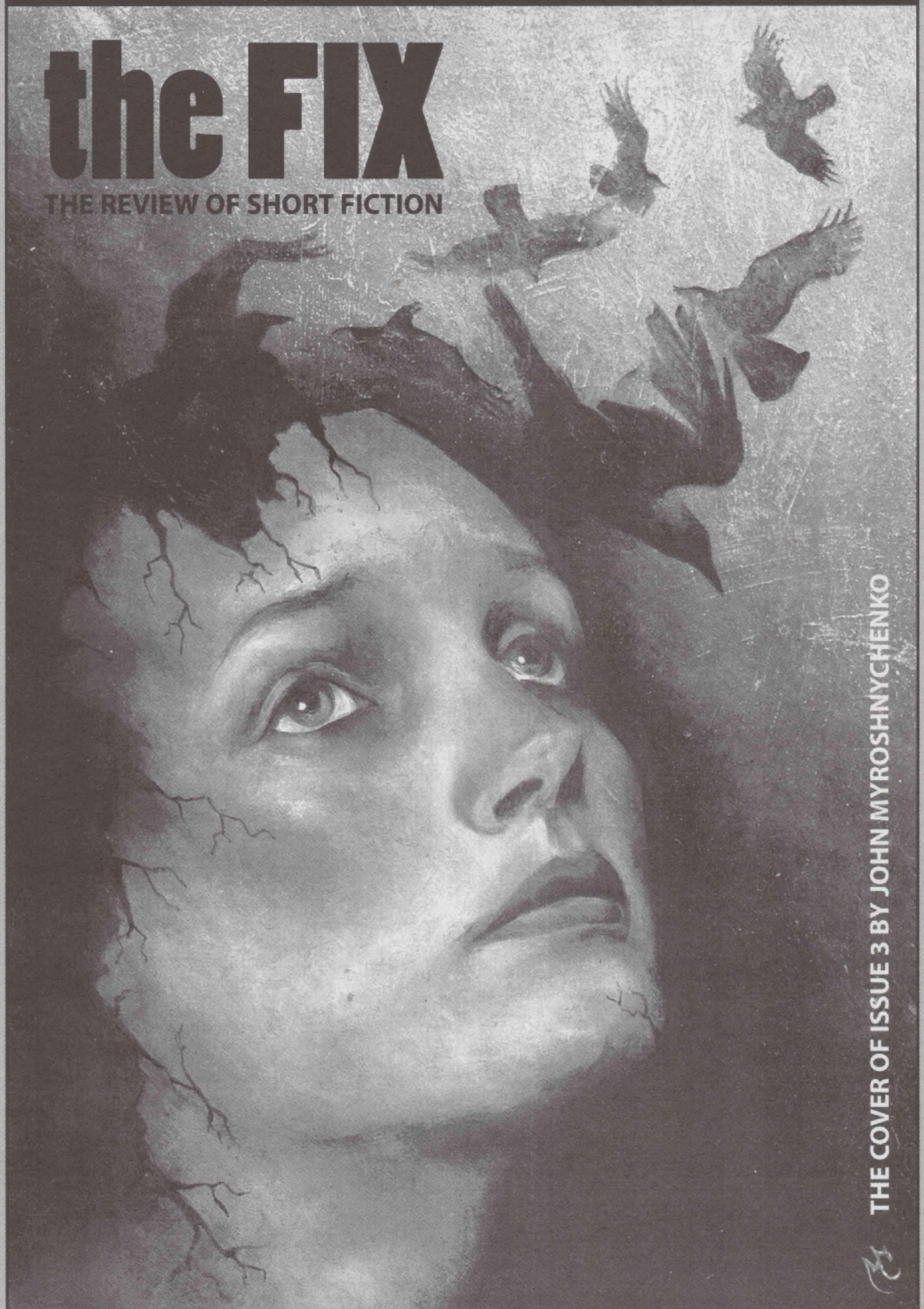
– looking at how Robert Bloch, Thomas Harris and Bret Easton Ellis have united the weird to suspense. Finally, there's an investigation of pseudo-, quasi-, and anti-weird fiction, the works of Robert Aickman and Peter Straub among others used as examples.

Although newly published, the book only covers works prior to 1994, and I do hope a future edition will cover a broader range of writers. Nevertheless, *The Modern Weird Tale* should prove essential for fans (and writers) of weird fiction, and may bring about a lively debate within the horror community.

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A NOVEL BY RAY NAYLER

# american graveyards

The Mojave is a graveyard. It lies between Los Angeles and Las Vegas, and through it runs a road where, in the middle of desert nights, all of the human predators in those two cities come to dump their prey.

Everything discarded, everything killed or broken or unwanted, it seems, ends up here. Sometimes, people find things. A hiker stumbles across a skull, a rusted six-shooter, a dead cowboy who took shade under a Joshua tree a hundred years ago and never moved again. The police dig up a body and find two more beneath it. Most of the time, though, things stay buried . . .

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